COMPLETING THE INCARNATION; WOMEN, GAY MEN AND NON-CHRISTIANS

By Don Evans

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One invitation from the organizers of this conference on Henri Nouwen was to consider where we go from here, ten years after his death. Although my presentation is not primarily a discussion of Henri Nouwen it does take off from his work. Initially I respond to some statements concerning incarnation that he made in his classic book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son.* Later I note that at L'Arche he was able to receive what had been lacking in his own rich spirituality. These aspects of his work and life are significant in relation to the central theme of this paper: how all of us, including women, gay men and non-Christians, can be seen as continuing and completing the incarnation initiated by God in Jesus.

Nowen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was part of a seminar course on "Varieties of Christian Spirituality: Theory and Practice" that I have taught twice for the Toronto School of Theology. His gracious, illuminating and self-revealing book stimulated more discussion among the students than any of the other four books. This was partly because most of the students, like thousands of other readers, could gratefully identify with him as he wrestles, in the light, with his own dark side. Another factor, however, was that some of the students, like me, were from the United Church of Canada, and saw deep tragedy in Nowen's not finding it possible to "come out" as a homosexual. (I will consider this issue later.) All participants, however, greatly appreciated his simple eloquence and his engaging invitation to intense self-exploration in dialogue with him and with each other.

Now I turn to my criticism of a passage where he discusses the incarnation of the divine in the human. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* Nouwen says, "What gives Rembrandt's portrayal of the father such an irresistible power is that the most divine is captured in the most human…The spiritual truth is completely enfleshed." [1] I agree with Nouwen that the incarnation is wondrously enfleshed by Rembrandt, but I question whether any image can be <u>complete</u> that is exclusively <u>male</u>. Rembrandt depicts

the compassionate God as a man. In addition, the deep life experiences that both Rembrandt and Nouwen bring to the painting are male. And most controversially, I note that the story originated from Jesus, and is exemplified by God's incarnation in Jesus, who was a man, not a woman.

Nouwen is remote from being sexist in his reflections concerning Rembrandt's painting. Indeed, he discerns strongly feminine and motherly qualities in the father and thereby in Father-God. He even contrasts the fatherly left hand, firmly holding the prodigal son, with the motherly right hand, gently caressing him, and receiving him back to her womb.[2] But the father-figure does not have a womb!

The absence of a womb in a male body does not matter if our theologizing is about God, for obviously many diverse symbols can be applied to God, and none of them are literal. Scripture has many motherly images for God. But if we are reflecting theologically about incarnation, on fleshly embodiment of the divine mystery in human beings, then we need to consider whether there are distinctive ways in which God's "feminine side" is experienced by women and manifested through women, not men. It is fashionable among some intellectualistic feminists to understand gender differences entirely as social constructs, but women typically have more direct access to the experience of greeting an estranged child with a womb-welcome. Some men are in a general way more compassionately welcoming than some women, but the distinctive bodily-linked welcoming is not available in us men. It was it not available in the humanity of Jesus, a male. So how could his incarnation of God be complete?

In asking this question, I am not implying that there was any component of Jesus' humanity that was not completely united with God. Nor am I denying that the incarnation of Jesus was in a unique way initiated by God. Indeed, I am understanding the Christian life as a continuation of God's incarnation in Jesus. Such an understanding is not universal among Christians, but it is common to both Methodist and Franciscan traditions – which were represented in the course alongside Nouwen. Sister Frances Teresa OSC says in her *Living the Incarnation*, "Like Francis, we gradually become incarnations of the incarnation. This is our

calling."[3]. She goes on to say, "The incarnation was not a divine contingency plan because things had gone wrong…. The coming of the Word in flesh means that there is now nothing in human life which is outside the divine involvement….As Christ shared our human nature, so may we be brought to share in his divine nature." [4] The origins of Methodism are similar in emphasis. John Wesley's famous conversion–experience ("I felt my heart strangely warmed") was sparked by hearing the scriptural assurance that we can become "partakers of the divine nature"[5]. For him this prospect waas not focused mainly on life in heaven. The process towards what he called "Christian perfection" can occur during this earthly life.[6] Such a process is appropriately understood as a continuation of the incarnation, a theological doctrine that for me as a Christian is linked with my experience of the bodily-resurrected Jesus pervading every cell of my own body and pervading the whole of creation, including all other human beings.

Was the incarnation of God in Jesus complete? Traditional Christian doctrine has assumed, indeed insisted, that it was. I agree with this, but only in the sense that every aspect of his humanity was pervaded by God. But when St. Paul says, "I complete what is lacking in Christ's <u>afflictions</u>"[7] is it possible to infer that more generally we might complete what is lacking in his <u>incarnation</u> of God? I am not claiming that St. Francis or the Wesleys would answer, "Yes" to this question, or that they would even raise the question. And I am not claiming that their conception of "incarnation" includes the kind of openness to bodily, sexual passion that I will eventually be presenting. All I am noting here is that they do state or imply that as Christians we <u>continue</u> the incarnation, and that this provides a context for thinking about <u>completing</u> the incarnation and for <u>deepening</u> our conception of what incarnation includes.

<u>Completing the Incarnation</u>

Are we called to complete the incarnation of God initiated by God in Jesus? This question arises for me, not as an intellectually stimulating speculation, but from two spiritual imperatives. The <u>first</u> imperative arises from my own experience of making up what is lacking in my own spirituality by resonating bodily with the distinctive spiritual energies in others. I am less

incomplete as a human being and as a Christian to the extent that I respond not only to the indwelling resurrected Jesus but also to a wide variety of human beings. What I mean by "bodily resonating" can be understood in terms of a musical analogy: When the damper pedal on a piano releases the strings to vibrate and you sing a note, the piano resonates with you by sounding the same note. Similarly it is possible for me to resonate with you, and with the risen Jesus, if whatever "constricts the strings" in my body is released. Typically my resistance to resonating involves bodily-emotional-spiritual contractions that are gradually released by spiritual vibrations of generous compassion and appreciation.[8]

There is also a <u>second</u> imperative requiring me to focus on completing the incarnation of God initiated by God in Jesus. It arises as I reflect on the human limitations of Jesus and the limiting effects of this in the history of the Christian Church. As the exemplary incarnator Jesus was a man, not a woman, And, so far as we know from Christian sources, he was a straight man, not a gay man; he was celibate, not sexually active. And although he was very Jewish in many ways, being Jewish rather than Christian soon became a liability, not an asset. And although some intellectuals from other religions have tried to claim him for their religion, Jesus was not a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Taoist or an aboriginal. All this shaped Christian history. Eventually male, straight, celibate Christians came to have central significance in the Christian Church. Women, gay men, sexually-active persons and non-Christians were, in varying degrees, marginalized and inadequately appreciated.

What does the idea of "completing the incarnation" add to the idea of "continuing the incarnation"? Clearly no one individual can "complete" the incarnation. He or she can make only a limited contribution process envisaged as culminating in an End of human history. Completion of God's incarnation in humankind is one version of an End that is implied in other expressions of Christian hope: "the (final) coming of the Kingdom" when eventually "God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven". What "completing the incarnation" adds to "continuing the incarnation" is a special significance, an <u>indispensable</u> <u>place</u>, for each person's unique spirituality in the overall scheme of things; and this is linked with a

Christian <u>hope</u> concerning a fulfillment of humankind in all its variations as an embodiment of the Divine Mystery.

What does completing the incarnation involve? The best entry-point to begin exploring this is to appreciate the unique embodiment of the Divine Mystery that every person, indeed every creature, can manifest simply by being who they are. This is eloquently expressed in a poem by the great Sufi mystical poet, Rumi.

<u>Rumi and Sounding from the Soul</u>

In other poems Rumi provides a context for the poem which I will quote. Rumi sees each human being as a reed, plucked by God from our river-bed source in God. God fashions each of us into a reed flute through which he blows. Each flute is unique, and so each soul-sound is unique, though all express our longing to reunite with their Source, a longing that Rumi experiences as awakening our soul-memory of our Source. Our sound can only be pure if God's breath is not impeded by our self-preoccupied fears.

Here is the poem:

God picks up the reed-flute world and blows.
Each note is a need coming through one of us,
a passion, a longing-pain.
Remember the lips
where the wind-breath originated,
and let your note be clear. Don't try to end it.
BE YOUR NOTE.
I'll show you how it's enough
Go up on the roof at night
In this city of the soul,
Let EVERYONE sing their notes! Sing loud![9]

This poem encourages all human beings to sound from their soul-connection with their divine Source, and what could be more embodied than your sound, vibrating through your physical body and then resonating in my ear-drums? The invitation is universal. There is no mention in the poem of any special place for Jesus. (I will come back to that later.) And the poem implies that as each

individual human reed-flute is completely itself in its sound, the whole world become a reed-flute that unites all the individuals.

Rumi's poem is indirectly relevant to the issue I have raised for Christians concerning completing the incarnation and it is directly relevant to an issue that arises for everyone: Is it possible for any individual to become completely human? My own answer is that no one person can fully include all the diverse dimensions of human nature: intellectual, emotional, sexual, gendered, intimately inter-personal, psychic, athletic, communally social-activist, ecologically-connected, artistic-creative, spiritual etc. We are completed by our fellow human beings, whose gifts we can celebrate to the extent that our sense of individual identity is expanded. Also, we are limited by our fellow human beings, in whose destructiveness we are also implicated if our identity is expanded. Rumi's poem invites us to embody and express the Mystery out of which we all continuously originate so that humankind becomes united as one "flute". Within various embodied spiritual traditions the expansiveness of mystical experience brings with it a celebration of other people's soul-expressions and a transformative, compassionate mourning of other people's suffering and sin. One example of mystical mourning is Christian participation in the redemptive sufferings of Jesus. Another is the ongoing vow on the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Buddhist path to go on re-incarnating until all human beings – indeed all beings – find liberation.

If it is impossible for any individual to become completely human, is it possible for humankind? I believe that it is rational to hope that eventually humankind will live in completion and in peace. My own hope is based on an understanding of human nature that has arisen for me during twenty years of dialogue and reflection. Even though we vary so greatly in our realization of the many dimensions of human nature, we do have one thing in common: a need to love and be loved. If this is true, and even more so if we need to experience loving and being loved not only in relation to other people but also in relation to God, then a completion in peace is possible, even if – as I will be noting at the end of this presentation – we also have tendencies to resist love and to promote destruction.

Sometimes, even now, we have glimpses of what a joyful completion for humanity would be when many individuals are "sounding their souls" together. It may be when a large choir is singing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" or when Paul McCartney is leading an international crowd in singing "All we need is love". Or, rather than sound, it may be silence. Sometimes, in support of world peace, there are times together when we set aside our conflicting convictions, temporarily letting go of our attachment to them as ultimate. In silence we experience our sacred unity-in-difference. As people say after such a ritual, "We're all in this together".

Such glimpses of the interdependence and interconnection of humankind are very significant for me, as are my moments of appreciating the unique "soul-soundings" of people from various religions and no religion. Such experiences lead me to reject Christian End-views of human completion where everyone must become consciously Christian. Indeed, as I will be noting later on, this could involve excluding much human embodiment of the divine that is more distinctively present within other religions and within secular stances. Nevertheless, my own awareness of the resurrection-body of Jesus is central for me, and this involves discerning the presence of Jesus in everyone. Although I resonate with Rumi's universal message, I also resonate with a great Christian poem by the Jesuit Gerard Manly Hopins.

Hopkins on Christ in Everyone

The first stanza of Hopkins' sonnet is very similar in its message to Rumi's poem. In the second stanza, however, Hopkins is very explicitly Christian. Here is Hopkins poem:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring: like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name,
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; MYSELF it speaks and spells,
Crying WHAT I DO IS ME: FOR THAT I CAME.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace; that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. [10]

The first stanza of Hopkins' poem sets forth a metaphysical vision that he explains elsewhere as a rendering of the medieval philosopher, Duns Scotus. Hopkins developed his own technical vocabulary to refer to the individual essence of each entity and the way in which this shapes the unique way in which the mystery of being is manifested. He begins the second, explicitly-Christian stanza with the words, "I say more". It's as if he can <u>add</u> a distinctively Christian framework to a framework that is already for him universal. The question that immediately arises for me is, "How important is it that all human beings come to accept the Christian addition?" Is Rumi in some way radically mistaken if he does not discern the divine mystery supremely by reference to Jesus?

My own untidy but livable way of responding to this issue is to continue in my own awareness of the risen Jesus within myself and everyone and everything, but to be open to experiencing the Divine Mystery alongside a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Taost or an aboriginal in ways which resonate with <u>their</u> experience. This involves not holding my own Christian experiences as ultimate for everyone. Indeed, some such a boundary on fanaticism seems to me necessary for <u>everyone</u> if human beings are henceforth to avoid the annihilation of humankind and even of all life on earth. (Modern technology makes such a catastrophe possible and human fanaticism makes it likely.) And, beyond such tolerance, my stance involves learning how to appreciate the distinctive bodily ways of opening into the Divine Mystery that other <u>traditions</u> provide. And beyond that, it is important to me to learn how to appreciate the immense variety of ways in which <u>individuals</u> "sound their soul", even where they see themselves as living outside any religious tradition.

<u>Recognizing Unappreciated Groups</u>

From this point on in my presentation, I will be assuming that the completion of humanity is involved in the completion of the incarnation initiated by Jesus, but my dialogue will be with fellow Christians, within a Christian framework. And although I see each individual human being as having a distinctive contribution to this process, there are three groups to be considered as groups. I will be doing this not only because each of the groups has been oppressed by Christians, but also because Christians have failed to recognize the distinctive contributions that some people within these groups offer, whether for the Church or for humanity. I will not be focusing on the oppression. Many writers have focused on it. What I will emphasize is the lack of positive appreciation.

The three groups are women, gay men and non-Christians.

I might have included another group, dear to the heart of Henri Nouwen through his experience in L'Arche: the mentally challenged. In Nouwen's experience these people matter not only because they have been marginalized, but also, and primarily, because of their distinctive spiritual contribution, their non-intellectual embodiment of love. Clearly he was very open to being enriched spiritually in response to people within L'Arche, making up what was lacking in his own spiritual life. Would he have interpreted this process in terms of "completing the incarnation"? Perhaps. What happened was that Nouwen's fervent eloquence in helping people to become aware that they are loved by God was in L'Arche mirrored back to him by individuals whose often-mute embodiment of divine love stirred him into a new personal assurance that he was beloved by God. Their embodiment of God was necessary for him. If it is, in principle, necessary for all of us human beings, then perhaps Henri could agree that it makes sense to speak of "completing the incarnation initiated by God in Jesus". I say "in principle" for what each of us especially and urgently needs to learn from other individuals is something that varies greatly, even within our own life-times. Perhaps what matters existentially in a theology of "completing the incarnation" is the summons for each of us to learn and receive from others what is crucially lacking in our own embodiment of God at a particular time.

I have been focusing on individual others, but there may be groups of people from whom all of us need to learn and receive, perhaps not crucially, but to some extent. One group is the mentally challenged. Three other groups are women, gay men and non-Christians. First, women.

The Distinctive Contribution of Women

Is there something distinctive about the ways in which some women, in contrast with men, can contribute to human embodiment of the Divine Mystery? The best way to find answers to this question is by asking women a specific question: As you explore your own sense of what you are here for, your "calling", as you uncover what it is for you (literally and metaphorically) to "sound from your soul", are there any ingredients of this calling/sounding that are included because you are a woman rather than a man?

Not all women provide an answer to this question. A few women, whose distinctiveness needs to be respected, feel that they are a man in a woman's body. Also in our society more than a few women have not as yet experienced any hints of a distinctive calling that they understand as being in some sense spiritual. And among those who do have a conscious spirituality, some have minimal awareness of embodying the Divine Mystery. Instead, they continue to follow male traditions that deplore the earthy, earthly body with its passions and sexuality, aspiring instead to disembodied spiritual states as a preparation for heaven. And, as I mentioned earlier, some feminist intellectuals have so vehemently rejected the constricting sexist claim that "biology is destiny" that they prejudge all alleged gender differences to be merely social constructs that each of us is free to reconstruct as we choose. I agree with those women who disagree with them, but I value the feminist insistence on opportunities for women to do whatever men do, if they so choose.

What I am presenting here concerning women draws on testimony that women have given me recently or over the years. My purpose to stimulate exploration of the issue, not to presume to be offering any exhaustive or definitive summary. Moreover, I am not looking for generalizations that apply without exception to all

women. If a woman finds that what I present as testimony from other women does not apply to her, then either it simply does not, or it would if they were to undergo processes similar to those of the women I cite. The latter may be true for some women, but it would be folly to insist that it is true for all women.

I'm considering distinctively female embodiments of the Divine Mystery, or soundings from the soul, or contributions towards the completion of the incarnation. And the framework within which I'm understanding this assumes that there are distinctively "masculine" and "feminine" dimensions of <u>every</u> human being which tend to be embodied in different ways by men and by women. And the most obvious difference is that men do not have a womb, and women do. All of us begin within a woman's womb. Once we are born, though we often continue in an especially intimate relation with mother through breast-feeding, we have begun to separate from her. Hence many women have spoken to me about their experience of having to <u>let go</u> of their children in a way that no man can experience. And this letting go involves a kind of sorrow that is distinctively female, a sorrow that is often reinforced later on in life when they have a mate and he leaves, for whatever reason. Dealing with the letting go of children and the sorrow associated with it involves a distinctive spiritual process, a distinctive sounding from the soul. Of course some women never have children, and some women who do are minimally aware of this process. But some women are clearly aware of it.

In our current culture, women are also involved in many activities previously reserved for men, and rightly so. What I'm reporting is a difference in <u>sensibility</u>, not necessarily a difference in <u>activity</u>. My emphasis on the womb does not mean that women are only fit for bearing and raising children. Indeed, I remember the reflections of one very activist modern woman who has absolutely no sense of gender limitations on what she can do in the world. She feels that she can empathize in a bodily way what it would be like to be a mother letting go of a child. And as a career woman she is not even sure that she will ever be a mother.

Very closely related to the sorrow involved in letting go of what has been inside a woman as a mother is a bodily-felt openness, a womb-openness, in welcoming a child back. Also, in various

stages after birth, some women provide what they called an ongoing "womb-basket" for other human beings, especially men. I've heard this "basket" described as an "earthy ground" or an "open container" or a "hearth-nest" that can help others, especially men, to sink into their own souls. By "soul" I mean that which integrates all aspects of me in my identity and opens me into the "Womb beyond all wombs", the Divine Mystery as feminine. One woman reports as follows: "As a woman I feel like a cauldron. So, I have the sense that people being in my presence, in a spiritual exploration, experience a space where they can transform alchemically." And there is also awareness of God active not only through women's re-birthing wombs but also through women's comforting breasts. I quote from India's "most renowned woman poet-saint", Mira:[11]

God has
a special interest in women
for they can lift this world to their breast
and help Him
comfort.[12]

Women who are aware of themselves in such a bodily-spiritual way tend to be, in my experience, women whose path has been deeply influenced by aboriginal spirituality in its pre-patriarchal forms. They have developed an interior awareness of spiritual energies within their bodies. They see themselves as retrieving a sensibility that has been lost because of repressive pressures and teachings from patriarchal religions such as Christianity. Of course patriarchy has recognized the distinctiveness of women's bodily-focused spirituality, but in a disparaging and repressive way, terrified of the overwhelming energy and presence of any woman who might retrieve her womb-power. Instead of allowing that to happen, patriarchal men have devised a spirituality that transcends the distracting urges and emotions of the body, and have even imposed this on women.

Indeed, I should note that some women have been robbed of their positive bodily self- awareness by a pervasive feature of patriarchal culture: sexual molestation of children by fathers or step-fathers or male family friends. The distinctive contribution spiritually of such women arises in spite of feeling driven to disown

the female bodies that drew such unwelcome attention. It has been my privilege to witness how some women, violated in childhood, venture an opening of their hearts to divine love, enabling them to love others, even men, in a wondrous way. But my focus in this presentation is mainly on women whose spirituality is less ambiguously embodied. So I turn to another embodied feature of some women's spirituality.

What I have in mind is an awareness of resonating bodily with the earth, the moon and the seasons, especially in relation to the menstrual cycle. It is possible for some men to feel connected with the earth, the moon and the seasons, but not as directly or as intimately. Thus some women have a distinctive "deep-ecological" sensibility that is important as all of us become more ecologically involved. And this contribution clearly comes more from "nature" rather than from "nurture" (i.e., societal role-assignments).

There is another distinction that is often made by women, but where the importance of "nurture" is perhaps greater: Women emphasize cultivating harmonious relations between persons in contrast with calculating and causing desired outcomes. Some women even go on to interpret this contrast in terms of a contrast between "being" (especially being-in-relation) and "doing" (especially controlling our environment). Concerning the emphasis on relations, however, we need to acknowledge that a focus on harmonious relations within a family has been not only a natural consequence of the primary role of a mother in an infant's life but also the socially-assigned task for women in many societies. Nevertheless biology is also relevant: the relation between mother and fetus in the womb, the relation with nature through the menstrual cycle, and perhaps some differences in women's brain functioning.

Men, nevertheless, may be more capable of relational sensibility and relational reflection than we have supposed. Many men are rejecting the patriarchal insistence that whatever can be done scientifically must be done. Instead, they subordinate science to concerns about relations among ourselves and with the planet. Such concerns, though perhaps somewhat more "natural" for women, are natural for all of us. Even if men are generally more

prone to focus on outcomes, the current fanaticism of some scientists can be seen as an aberration.

Another distinctive feature of some women's spirituality is a strong bodily sense of solidarity and connection with mother, her mother, her mother's mother, and back through history. Also, the solidarity and connection sometimes extends in the present to other mothers – in some cultures, say, meeting at the village well. This can be understood partly as an effect of patriarchal silencing of women, who could only communicate, only "sound from their souls" outside male-dominated settings. There is also, however, a bonding that occurs because of sharing a common womb-sensibility, with all that this includes: letting go and welcoming back, resonating with nature, and cultivating relationships.

What I have presented concerning women embodying the Divine Mystery could be seen as supporting traditional values that have subordinated women to men within the Church, but this is not so. First, I have insisted that a distinctive female <u>sensibility</u> should not limit the range of female <u>activity</u>. Second, I have not claimed that <u>all</u> women have this sensibility. Third, the sensibility, as outlined, implies that women would make excellent priests, better suited than men to a sacramental ministry! Discussion of women priests has been banned within the Roman Catholic Church, but my own United Church of Canada has ordained women since the 1930s.

Before I move on to consider gay men, I should emphasize that my exploration of women's distinctive spiritual contributions has only been an initial sketch. For example, I have said nothing about one important sub-group of women: lesbians. This is partly because, although I have some lesbian friends, I have much less testimony from which to draw from them than I have from gay men.

<u>The Contributions of Gay Men</u>

When I ask what distinctive contributions gay men can make towards the completion of Jesus' incarnation I am being very controversial. For most Christians what I am calling for requires

an enormous shift in perspective. For many centuries Christians have denounced homosexual desires and acts as evil, persecuting. homosexuals in terrible ways. Some contemporary Christians have advocated more gentleness in denunciation and zero tolerance for persecution. But I am going far beyond this. I am claiming that some homosexuals embody elements of an exemplary spirituality that is largely lacking among the heterosexual majority. Again, as in the section on the distinctive spiritual contributions of women, I am not presenting a sociological survey. I am citing claims made by some members of the group, and thereby encouraging us to listen to testimony and thereby become more open to appreciate distinctive contributions.

My first point is not as central as the ones I will go on to outline, but it was conveyed to me by a gay Christian minister as an important part of his personal experience. When in his teens he was astonished to find that he was gay, and realized what fear and loathing this would evoke in many people around him, he was thrown into much intensive theological reflection concerning why God would create him in this way and what this deviance meant for him in terms of God's calling. He noted that although he no longer sees being gay as a disability, he sees similar probing questions being asked by people who have been born with a serious bodily disability or disfigurement. I have also found this to be the case with the female victims of childhood abuse whom I mentioned earlier. A distinctively powerful reliance on the love of God is sometimes a common feature within all three groups and, more generally, within all groups who have been marginalized. Another gay Christian speaks of having to "deconstruct and reconstruct one's identity before one is able to enjoy a feeling of basic goodness concerning who one is". This process of inquiry into self and God can seem utterly necessary to some gay men, unlike many whose orientation does not mark them as deviant. And the process can lead to the realization of our "utter dependence on Spirit".

Henri Nouwen's intense emphasis on being loved by God arose to some extent from his being a gay man. To what extent, I do not know. To me it is a terrible tragedy that until very recently most gay men in our society did not dare to acknowledge their sexual activities or even their orientation, mainly because of Church teachings. And it is especially tragic that Henri, almost

unique among spiritual writers in explicitly exploring his hidden wounds, apparently saw his homosexuality as in itself a wound, and as a wound to be shared with very few people. What anguish for a man who "sounded from his soul" in such profound and inspiring ways not to be able to include a celebration of his being a gay man, loved by God! His decision not to reveal his orientation during his life-time offends some gay men, but I respect the integrity of that decision. What remains after his death is a fruitful challenge for Christians who still accept traditional teaching concerning homosexuals: How could it be that a man who was in so many respects so saintly was a homosexual? In response to this question some traditional Christians concede that perhaps the orientation as such is not inherently sinful, only the sexual acts. My own view, however, is that homosexual acts are not intrinsically sinful and may indeed be holy and loving. For all I know, Henri remained celibate, but the issue concerning homosexual acts is the crucial challenge that Christians need to face.

Now I present two aspects of gay spirituality that gay men have proposed as distinctive contributions. Many gay men are predominantly masculine or feminine, but some have been viewed with deep respect as special exemplars of a kind of androgyny, an inner marriage of masculine and feminine dimensions in human beings. All human beings are called towards such a marriage within themselves, which reflects the union of masculine and feminine within the Godhead. Andrew Harvey, in his audio-tapes on "Gay Mysticism"[13] celebrates the unique contribution of gay spiritual-sexual unions in divine-human mystical union, citing the poetry of Walt Whitman as an example. Also, less mystically, the discernment of some gay men as sacred symbols of masculine-feminine harmony was, and is, obvious in many pre-patriarchal societies. I have heard of a discussion of gays in the World Council of Churches where a spokesperson for a largely aboriginal Christian community in the South Seas noted that such men are regarded highly because of their distinctive spiritual gifts. ("The more we have in our congregation, the better!")[14] A non-spiritual appreciation is expressed in settings of contemporary urban renewal, where gays combine a "masculine" practical assertiveness, planning and executing necessary change, with a "feminine" sensibility concerning imaginative and respectful renovation of what's already there. Men and women working

together can bring about something similar, but only if they are deeply respectful of each other's distinctive gifts.

Urban renewal is only one context where some gay men have a distinctive contribution. More generally there is often is an unusually animated and expansive artistic creativity in the arts that overflows into their lives. Such creativity occurs in straight men, but perhaps not proportionally, and in some gay men it does seem to be linked with their androgyny, together with their special need to sublimate their sexual passion through music or painting or dancing or sculpting or writing. Of course their creativity arises mainly from their unique gifts as human beings, but their gayness seems to contribute in important ways.

A second feature that is highlighted by some gay men is the extent to which gay sexual/spiritual attraction is essentially a calling into sensuous, bodily celebration of each other and of life. In Christian history such celebration has been almost universally denounced, homosexual, non-procreative sex has been regarded as obviously sinful. For many centuries gay men have been oppressed. When gay pride parades emerged in recent decades they have expressed a revolt against this oppression, and an affirmation of sexual pleasure as such. It must be acknowledged that some gay men, like some straight men, seek sexual pleasure in ways that do not respect their sexual partner as a person. Our culture is pervaded by portrayals of sex as a commodity, and sexual pleasure is construed by many, whether gay or straight, swinger or religious, solely as a matter of fantasy plus friction.

Sexual pleasure, however, can be experienced primarily in the awareness of creative sexual energies flowing through our bodies, whether we are by ourselves or with others. One version of such a sexual-spiritual awareness is eloquently expressed in some of the writings of D.H. Lawrence[15]. Another version is intensely experienced by some people undergoing the psychotherapeutic process called "bio-energetics"[16]. A mystical version is revealed in intimate poetry of St. Teresa of Avila[17]. Such varied experiences of sexual-spiritual awareness are rare within our culture, but they do seem to be less rare among gay men because of their lesser resistance to sexual pleasure. That was the testimony of some gay clergy who challenged non-gays at a conference for men that I

attended in 1994. We were told to stop trying to insulate our spirituality from our sensuality, our joy in God from our joy in sex.
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Moreover, I have been told that, in contrast with most straight men, some gay men respect their temporary lovers and retain them as close friends after one or the other has moved on. In my own view this is a healthy challenge to many heterosexual attitudes concerning sex. The mutual exchange of sexual energies and of loving touch can be good in itself in many contexts other than heterosexual marriage. I agree, however, that a reference to marriage can be helpful in reminding us of two considerations: First, ongoing long-range relationships are important as a secure setting for children. Second such relationships are important also as a "school of character", in contrast with relationships that involve no commitment to work things through as they arise. Heterosexual marriage, however, tends to be over-idealized by traditional Christians. Monogamous relationships between heterosexuals in a patriarchal culture have often provided a very insecure and unsafe setting for children, partly because of religious repression of sexual-spiritual energies. And I should also note my own experience of those gay men, a minority, who are engaged in life-long commitments. In general they manifest a love that is more mature, indeed more inspiring, than that of most married heterosexuals. And I have heard similar testimony from other United Church ministers who officiate at marriages between gay men. Such men are more likely to be better parents than most married heterosexuals. And, more generally, what our culture needs is more awareness of what some gays especially exemplify: how to cultivate bodily a flow of energy that is both spiritual and sexual. As with my sketch of distinctive contributions by some women, I am inviting people to <u>listen</u> to gay testimony. In a similar spirit, a recent book by Jeffrey Heskins (*Face to Face: Gay and Lesbian Clergy on Holiness and Life Together*[18]) presents recorded interviews, quoting Bonhoeffer: "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the word of God".

There is a link between the subordination of women to male authority and the persecution of homosexual men. Both arise from a male fear of embodied sexuality, whether in women or in gay men. Both predominate in religious institutions that arose in patriarchal societies. Both require the imposition of strenuous

constrictions on sexual desires and sexual activities, constrictions that tend to yield either a shrivelling of human creativity or an unleashing of impersonal lust. Both involve fear, even terror, concerning what will happen if women enter fully into their sexual-spiritual powers and if gay men are free to be themselves. The intensity of this fear has become evident in the expressed concern of some Church leaders who view recent trends in society as a total destruction of "our Christian way of life".

In so far as I am emphasizing the sexual dimension of our humanity as an integral part of what needs to be pervaded by the Divine Mystery in full incarnation, I am in conflict with predominant emphases in both scripture and tradition. It is not that I go along with current re-writing of the Christian story to make Jesus and Mary Magdalene lovers. Rather, I see the celibacy of Jesus as an unfortunate limitation, but not a crucial limitation if we are open to seeing the incarnation of God in Jesus as pervading all of him, but as needing completion by others. Indeed, if he were not celibate, the incarnation in him would need to be completed by celibates!

Of course, the incarnation of Jesus, including his celibacy, is already being completed by individuals who are celibate, for each individual contributes in his/her own unique way. And, more generally, although I have emphasized the sexually embodied spiritual contribution of some women and some gay men, I believe it is important to appreciate each individual person's contribution. Indeed, wherever people have been marginalized by society, their struggle to learn how to receive and give love has a special dignity. Also, I want to acknowledge that some very disembodied, world-transcending spiritualities may have a distinctive contribution to make. I am thinking, for example, of some Theravadin Buddhist or Advaita Hindu approaches that have much to teach us concerning how to discern our attachments and let go into the Mystery[19].

The Need for Non-Christians, Now and at the End

When I presented the poems by Rumi and Hopkins, I spoke of continuing and deepening my awareness of the risen Jesus

within myself and everyone and everything, while also continuing to be open to experiencing the Divine Mystery in ways that resonate bodily with the spiritual experience of people within their various non-Christian traditions. This process has been going on for thirty years, and although I have no neat and tidy way to formulate this theologically, I can sketch some relevant considerations.

One way of construing what I have been proposing concerning mentally challenged adults, women and gay men within the Christian Church is in terms of St. Paul's doctrine that the Church is the body of Christ. He stresses the interdependence of the various parts of a human body, so that it is ridiculous for one part to say, of another part, "I have no need of you." Following on with this analogy, I can go on to challenge Christian assumptions concerning the subordinate "place" of women and the "no-place" of gay men within that body. Concerning non-Christians and the body of Christ, I am inviting Christians to include them in their understanding of what is within the body of Christ, thereby challenging any exclusionary "I have no need of you". Yet I have reservations concerning this, as I have with Karl Rahner's similar proposal[20] that we see such people as Rumi or the Dalai Lama or the Hindu saint Ramana Maharshi as "anonymous Christians". Both interpretations are an improvement on an exclusive "only through Christ" position that acknowledges nothing of fundamental value in non-Christian spiritualities. The inclusion, however, implies that everything of value in their embodiment of the Mystery arises from a relation with Jesus that is hidden from them but known by Christians. On the contrary, Rumi and the Dalai Lama and Ramana are not only in some ways similar to Jesus but also in other important ways different, adding distinctive ingredients to humanity's total embodiment of the Mystery and, more generally, to the completion of humankind.

Some Hindu theologians view Jesus and Christians as, in effect, "anonymous Hindus". That is, they respect us in that we manifest aspects of the Mystery that are included within Hindu theology. They include us, however, on their own terms, understanding our contribution in ways that we would only adequately understand if we became Hindus. We Christians need to avoid doing the same thing, absorbing non-Christians into our

frameworks. How then can there be constructive dialogue? Only if we and, say, Hindus, while not denying that we understand the other faith from a position within our own faith-perspective, do not insist that our position is final, and remain open to learn from the other. How will this work out in the End, if there is an End? We do not know. But meanwhile we need to have some humility concerning our access as a spiritual community to the Mystery, and some humanity concerning "We are all in this together". We Christians need to balance our sense of living within the body of Christ and our sense of living within the body of humankind. Our Christian sensibility need not be in conflict with our humanistic sensibility if we acknowledge as Christians that we need people of other faiths. We are Christians and we are human beings.

Contributions toward the completion of humankind are not confined to people of other faiths, but can include people who are agnostic or atheistic and who are thoroughly secular in their world-view. An immense variety of people can have a useful and even necessary place in the contemporary world. Pope Benedict XVI, when he was a theology professor, conceded that "heretics and atheists provide a service when they criticize dubious religious thinking and practice".[21] And, more positively, I would add that some vigorously secular persons are more compassionate than most religious folk. And often they are less prone to what Pope Benedict called "the ambiguities that bedevil all religion, where one can find 'the most awful fanaticism, self-alienation and human degradation".[22] Indeed, the history of the Christian Churches does not inspire in me a hope that in the End Christianity will triumph institutionally over all other institutions. Although it has preserved and created spiritual riches, and has done much to relieve suffering, Christianity has tended to misuse its power whenever there were no other institutions to limit it. In our contemporary world, with the technological possibility that human beings may destroy all life on earth, it is clear that fanaticism, whether religious or scientific, needs to be restrained and that compassion needs to be welcomed from any individual or group.

Complexities arise, however, when I consider my own eschatological hope, my own vision of a completion of humanity at the End. I hope that we will all be consciously pervaded by Divine

Love in an embodied mystical state wherein I and other Christians can centrally resonate in God through Jesus, but also in God with people whose embodied mystical path is mainly through Rumi, or the Dalai Lama, or Ramana Maharshi, or the Buddhist "goddess" Kwan Yin or someone else from our human past and our human future. And my own commitment to bodily-mystical transformation in this earthly life, while it involves a genuine appreciation of people who have no such commitment, moves me to hope that eventually <u>everyone</u> will enjoy a transformed divine-human life together, a heaven on earth, a humanity completed in Divine Love, full of harmony and peace and joy.

How can I reconcile my eschatological hope with my present stance of appreciation for anyone who exemplifies love or compassion, regardless of whether or not they are embodied mystics? Perhaps it is not so complex after all. What is required of me is to understand and to revise any vision of the End in relation to what I am called to be and to do in the here and now. Perhaps this is what St. Paul was doing when he spoke of making up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ: not trying to formulate a theology of the End, but providing a context for his current struggles. Indeed, scripture itself includes in relation to the End both a practical imperative to active compassion (Matthew 25) and depictions of an embodied mystical transformation that begins now (John 15-17). Both feeding the hungry and receiving empowerment to love like Jesus are needed in an eschatological process that begins now.

Am I retracting my proposal that Christians view the current contributions that we and others make in terms of "completing the incarnation" initiated by God in Jesus? No. Even if we do not have a clear theology concerning what such a completion will involve in the End, we have enough hints to inspire hope. And we also have a basis for including a wide range of human lives and actions as necessary ingredients in the process of completion. Above all, a person need not fit any narrow definition of what it is to be a "Christian" in order to be respected and celebrated. As people rightly say, "We're all in this together".

Nevertheless it is obvious that for many people human life is a matter of "us" <u>versus</u> "them". Indeed, one prevalent tendency

among human beings is to "demonize" those who are, or who seem to be, our enemies. That is, we project our own unacknowledged destructiveness on to them in self-righteous indignation so that they appear to be entirely evil and we appear to be entirely good. One of the deplorable elements in religion is a tendency to reinforce this tendency to demonize others rather than inspire us to develop a humble compassion towards others. Ironically, when we demonize others, we usually[24] are involved in something semi-demonic ourselves, the refusal to discern their humanity.

By what criteria are we Christians to decide what to appreciate in others, whether these be mentally challenged adults, women or gay men within the Church or people of different faith or no faith? Obviously the criteria will arise primarily from our own experience as Christians, drawing in various ways on scripture and tradition. But we need to be willing to have our criteria revised in dialogue with others and in the experience of resonating with others. The process will vary for each of us, partly because of variations in what we individually need to learn from others, making up what is lacking in our own spirituality. The extent of our openness to learning will vary, and also the groups from whom we are called to learn, whether these be the mentally challenged, women, gay men, people of other faiths or people of no faith. What matters is that Christians become more open. I suggest that we understand this openness in terms of how we and others are helping to complete the incarnation that God initiated in Jesus.

And perhaps we might even ponder the words of the Sufi poet Hafiz:

"God said,
'I am made whole by your life. Each soul,
each soul completes
me." [24]

End-Notes

1 Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*: *A Story of Homecoming*, (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), p. 93.

2 Ibid, pp. 98-100.

3 Frances Teresa, OSC, *Living the Incarnation: Praying with Francis and Clare of Assisi,* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), p.98.

4 Ibid. pp. 55, 58.

5 2.Peter 1.4 (RSV). For Wesley's report of his conversion, see John and Charles Wesley, edited, with an introduction, by Frank Whaling (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1981) pp.106-7.

6 Ibid. p.54.

7 Col. 1.24 (RSV)

8 For a more thorough exploration of how we can "know by resonating", see my essay, "Life after Death: Reflections on Experiences" on my website: http://individual.utoronto.ca/devans. See also Donald Evans, "A Shamanic Christian Approach in Psychotherapy" in Seymour Boorstein, ed. *Transpersonal Psychotherapy*, 2nd edition, (New York, N.Y.; State University of New York Press, 1996) chapter 25.

9 Coleman Barks, translator, *The Essential Rumi* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1995) p.103.

10 *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edition, ed. by W. H. Gardner and N.H.MacKenzie, (Oxford: OUP, 1970) p. 90 (#57).

11 *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, Daniel Ladinsky, translator (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 2002) p.240.

12 Ibid. p.246.

13 Andrew Harvey, *Gay Mysticism: Ecstasy and Transfiguration through Divine Love*, (Boulder, CO; Sounds True Audio-Tapes, phone 800-333-9185, 2000

14 For one survey of research concerning the appreciative acceptance of gay men for their spiritual gifts within North

American aboriginal societies, see Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue*, expanded edition (Boston: Beacon,1984) pp.53-60.

15 D.H. Lawrence, The *Virgin and the Gipsy, (Penguin, 1970)*; *The Man Who Died* (Vintage, 1953*).*

16 Alexander Lowen, Depression *and the Body; The Biological Basis of Faith and Reality (Penguin, 1973.)*

17 *Love Poems from God*, pp. 280-81,"Know, Dear, Know" which includes:

Why should I not give to myself
what a tended skilled husband could and remain free
of the external bindings of
another?
And God replied, "To those who are married
to me, I'll take care of things like that."

18 (Grand Rapids,MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

19 See Donald Evans, *Spirituality and Human Nature,* (Albany, N.Y.: S.U.N.Y Press, 1993) chapter X "Spirituality and Christian Openness to Other Faiths" where I contrast spiritual paths transcending our humanity with paths including our humanity. In the former we aspire to become like <u>transparent</u> windows for the sunlight to shine through, and in the latter the various coloured patterns in our <u>translucency</u> are part of the "message". But the latter's "fullness" requires balance from the former's "emptiness".

20 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations,* Vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969) p.131. For background to Rahner's position in St. Paul's Areopagus speech and the writings of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, see Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) pp.38-52.

21 Ronald Modras, "In His Own Footsteps: Benedict XVI: From Professor to Pontiff" (*Commonweal,* April 21) p.13.

22 Modras, <u>op.cit</u>., p.13.

23 I insert the word "usually" here because, extremely rarely, human beings do become "demonic", or very close to "demonic" in the sense of being totally committed to eliminating the divine light and love in human beings. Or, to put it another way, although as human individuals they still have souls that a saint could discern, they have totally hidden this from themselves and from any non-saints. For further discussion of the "demonic", see the reference in end-note #8 to my chapter in Seymour Boorstein, ed. pp.479-81.

24 Ladinsky, op. cit. page v.