

Roundtable Discussion

MYSTICISM AND FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

NO-SELF AND THE CALLING GIVEN TO ANYONE:
THE CHALLENGE OF MYSTICISM
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One morning as I was making the bed, a sheet of paper fell from the books stacked near my pillow. Picking it up, I read:

All the voices of the wood called "Muriel!"
but it was soon solved; it was nothing, it was not for me.
The words were a little like *Mortal and More and Endure*
and a word like *Real*, a sound like *Health or Hell*.
Then I saw what the calling was: it was the road I traveled, the clear
time and these colors of orchards, gold behind gold and the full
shadow behind each tree, and behind each slope. Not to me
the calling, but to anyone, and at last I saw: where
the road lay through sunlight and many voices and the marvel
orchards, not for me, not for me, not for me.
I came into my clear being; uncalled, alive, and sure.
Nothing was speaking to me, but I offered and all was well.

And then I arrived at the powerful green hill.¹

I had copied this poem months before, hoping it would help me understand the vocation of an artist. Until my twenties, I had been certain I was called to be a preacher. My evangelical community refused to ordain women, so I embarked on a career as a Christian feminist theologian and embraced a vocation as a teacher. At forty, I converted to Judaism and gave up my tenured seminary pro-

Many thanks to the friends, colleagues, reviewers, editors, and editorial assistant who helped me clarify this essay.

¹ Muriel Rutkeyser, *Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 267.

fessorship. After serving for a time as a lay leader of a Jewish congregation, wondering if I was really meant to be a rabbi, I began to write fiction. By my early fifties, I had published a novel and a collection of stories, but my true calling still eluded me. I searched Muriel Rukeyser's poem for clues. The opening lines I understood: Like many an adolescent, I had heard my name called in autumn woods and by rocky creeks; like many children and adults, I had experienced More and Mortal through nature. At the fifth line, "Then I saw what the calling was," my heart quickened and I seized on the next lines for the promised answer to my lifelong quest. But they made no sense. No calling for the poet, the artist? For any individual? Wasn't each of us, in the great democracy of spirit, called to a unique path of serving, as scholar, friend, comedian, *something*? Disenchanted, I stuffed the poem under my books.

The morning Rukeyser's poem fell open to me, I read it again. This time the poem's vision, "Not to me / the calling, but to anyone," came clear. I did not have a calling anymore than anyone else did, I suddenly realized. No one *had* a calling. Calling was not a specific set of responsibilities given to each individual—rabbinic duties for one, lay leadership for another; scholarly pursuits for her, activism for him. Calling was a *way of being*, a *way of living* with God. The calling was the road *we* travel through the marvel of the world. Blinded by "I," absorbed in "my," I had not seen that the calling could never be mine: It was *ours*. The Calling is all, "I" is nothing. To insist on being a separate self is to miss the Way.

What is the obstacle, kabbalist Adin Steinsaltz asks, to cleaving to God so one can serve in truth? "The existence of a separate self." Each person is challenged to become "a tool in God's hands," "a Chariot of the *Shekinah*. What is involved is a nullification of self."² This language, typical of mystics, was anathema to me—in spite of assurances that to be a "vehicle of sanctity" is to know "the joy of release from the self."³ Alert to sexism's submersion of women's selves in the "common" good and intent on becoming a free and empowered self, I found all talk of vehicles and nullification of self just one more turn of the patriarchal screw.

I was also troubled by some feminists' attempts to redefine selfhood. In developing a relational view of the self inspired by women's experience of connectedness, they eschewed the notion of a separate self, which they identified with Western culture's essentialist view of an autonomous self. With Catherine Keller and other feminist scholars, I did not want to play into this dichotomous thinking; nor, in giving relationality its due, was I willing to forfeit "the unique integrity of a focused individuality, traditionally linked to a clearly demarcated

² Adin Steinsaltz, *The Long Shorter Way: Discourses on Chasidic Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), 233.

³ *Ibid.*, 210 (emphasis added); see also 240–41.

ego."⁴ Formed by the social thought of George Herbert Mead and H. Richard Niebuhr, I believed only a theory of a free *and* responsible self could do justice to human existence. But now, awakened by Rukeyser's poem, I felt myself challenged to lay aside my insistence on the separate self, perhaps even forfeit it, to follow the Way. This was an awakening I had resisted for decades.

Vehicles, Vessels, and an Ear Hearing

For years, I had criticized many of the traits commonly associated with mysticism—escapism, asceticism, elitism, emotionalism, passivity, negation of the self, and privatism—that I believed ran counter to an integrated spirituality aimed at transforming the world.⁵ Evidence of mystics who belied these traits did not persuade me otherwise: I considered mystics such as the communitarian Béguines and the political revolutionary Thomas Müntzer to be exceptions. Attempts to reclaim ancient and medieval women mystics as proto-feminists or to create a gender-bound definition of "woman's" spirituality did not dispel my skepticism either.⁶ In my fifties, as I underwent a chain of family traumas, experienced a series of mystical encounters, re-read mystics' accounts of their experiences, and critically reflected on the social construction of the concept of mysticism, these common cultural assumptions about mysticism I had uncritically adopted began to be challenged and revealed as false. The myths of mysticism as passive, negating of the self, and limited to inner, private experience were the last to go.

⁴ Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 2. Keller's argument was one of the earliest and most thoughtful feminist analyses of the dangers of the Western conception of a male-defined separate ego and the possibilities of a feminist-inspired view of social selves (2, 247) for our understanding of self and God. For a recent study, see Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2006). Davaney expertly traces the rise of historicism as a critique of the longstanding theory of human existence as autonomous rationality.

⁵ For an extended critique of the contemporary philosophical (mis)understanding of all mysticism as essentially an intense subjective and therefore private experience, see Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For an account of coming to terms with these and other false assumptions, see my spiritual autobiography, "Seeking God and Losing the Way: Confessions of a Reluctant Mystic" (currently under review by publishers).

⁶ Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* critiques such one-sided interpretations, providing instead a view of the ways ancient and medieval female mystics accepted sexist constraints and pushed against gender boundaries. Her Foucault-inspired analysis of the social construction of mysticism in ancient and medieval Christianity focuses on the relation of soul and body, mystical language, and ecclesiastical authority versus female mystics' reliance on the authority of experience to develop her thesis that who counts as a mystic depends as much on power and gender as it does on an individual's experiences and beliefs (264). See also Caroline Walker Bynum's study of women's fasting and participation in the Eucharist in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

The vehicle and vessel talk favored by mystics had always irked me; it smacked of passivity, the worst of the errors I held against mystics, believing them uninterested in social justice. As a feminist, I was outraged by endless variations on vessel-hood: the Aristotelian model of the womb as inert container for the spontaneously fertile male seed; the pagan model of the prophet raped by God (as in Pär Lagerqvist's *The Sybil*); the traditional Virgin Mary; fundamentalists' model woman as empty container waiting to be filled; and Jungian and kabbalistic myths of "receiving woman." I was also horrified at the thought of being used by another for that other's ends. I refused to be an empty motel room for the Divine to flop in at will; I wanted to be an active, free, responsible, and gloriously individual self. No one, I thought, could be further from being a holy vessel than I. But after hearing Rukeyser's calling given to anyone, I wasn't so sure. Everything I believed about calling, selfhood, and mysticism was thrown into question. Perhaps the mystics' images of vessel and vehicle pointed to a truth like the poet's: that being truly alive means following the Way through the marvel orchards rather than staking one's claim in the world. Like the poet, Adin Steinsaltz spoke of a calling given to *anyone*, a way of being, of living with one's entire being in communion with the Alive; for him, too, traveling that way required *surrender* of self—"not for me, not for me, not for me." Frightening as that refrain was, it nevertheless urged me toward a new vision of calling.

The story of the prophet Samuel's calling (1 Samuel 3:3–10) haunted me from the moment I first heard it as a child. When a voice called me in the night, the summer I was five, I jumped up, like my hero, saying, "Here am I. What do you want *me* to do?" Such a self-full interpretation is healthy in a child developing her ego, but as an adult, I did not outgrow this meaning: I continued to seek the way I was to serve. Now, reading this story with ears tuned to the calling given to anyone and nullification of self, I saw how misdirected this long search for my vocation was. The first two times a voice calling his name wakes him up, Samuel responds as an immature self. "*Hineini*, Here am I," he insists to Eli. "You called *me*." The third time it happens, the old priest understands he must teach the boy how to truly wake up, how to respond to *God*. "If you are called again," he says, "say 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant heareth.'" When one is awake to the calling of God, the response is not "Here am I," but "Speak, Lord, *Your* servant heareth."

"*Ego*, the word 'I,'" Meister Eckhart (1260–1327 CE) once preached, "is proper to no one but God alone in his uniqueness."⁷ Centuries later, Hasidic mystics conveyed this radical view of God and I-hood in a story about a disciple of the Great Maggid (Dov Baer of Mezritch, 1704–1772) who knocks on the door of an intimate friend. The friend asks, "Who is it?" and the disciple, certain his voice will be recognized, replies, "I." When no one responds, the disciple

⁷ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), 191.

cries out, "Why don't you open for me?" From behind the door the friend calls out, "Who is it that dares call himself 'I' as befits only God himself!" Hearing this, the disciple says to himself, "I have not learned nearly enough," and returns home.⁸

All those years, I eagerly repeated: "Here I am, Tell *me* how to serve." I thought I was awake to *God*. But it was *I* who was talking, pursuing, hungering to serve, listening. *I* must stop. It is not I who must speak, but the One calling; not *I* who must listen, but *Your servant*, There is no calling *for me*; the calling is present for anyone who, humbled from I-ness, learns to lose her self, freely, on the Way and become nothing but an ear hearing the ever-present Voice.

Nullification of Self: What Kind of Nothing Are We Talking About?

For the experience of awakening to Being "to be complete," Evelyn Underhill says, it has to involve "the definite emergence of the self from 'the prison of I-hood,' so it can set out on the Mystic Way."⁹ Mystics refer to this liberation from self in many ways: "a fathomless sinking in a fathomless nothingness,"¹⁰ "stripping oneself,"¹¹ and, more commonly, "the poverty of the self." By far the favored expression, however, is "the annihilation" or "nullification" of self. "Be-

⁸ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2 vols., trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991), 1:199–200.

⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (1911; reprint, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), 195. Mystics' firsthand accounts of their experiences contradict Jantzen's incidental claim that "the annihilation or absorption of the self" is one of "the major ingredients of modern [mis]conceptions of mysticism" inspired by Romanticism (*Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 320) and therefore not part of earlier Christian mysticism. Though certain early Christian mystics may not speak of annihilation or absorption of the self, many mystics—ancient, medieval, and contemporary; Jewish, Christian, and Muslim; female and male—have witnessed both the *experience* of the annihilation of self in relation to the One and the *need* to nullify oneself or die to self for such experiences of the One to occur. Mysticism is widely misunderstood (as Jantzen argues and this essay demonstrates) and notoriously difficult to define, because it is a minority strand in religion and because it encompasses such diverse phenomena: theism and nontheism, union and communion, quietism and dissent, philonimism and antinomianism, asceticism and joyful embodiment, abstract thought and affective knowing, extraordinary experiences and ordinary living deepened by awareness. I agree with those who do not limit mysticism to a set of special experiences or esoteric teachings outside, against, or supplementary to religion, but see it as an underground stream running through and beyond all religious traditions—a stream that constantly refreshes those traditions by urging *everyone* in the community to draw near the Divine and to cultivate a deeper, more direct relationship with the Divine, a way of living continually in the ceaseless flow between the center of one's being and all being. As a feminist and historian, I am wary of attempts to reduce mysticism to a single abstract definition or to identify a monolithic essence of mysticism that underlies all traditions. As did Rufus Jones and William James, I prefer to look at recurring themes in diverse mystics' accounts of their dynamic experiences, to take seriously mystics' stress on the inadequacy of language, and to offer commentary.

¹⁰ Johann Tauler (c. 1300–1361 CE), Sermon XXIII on St. Matthew, quoted in Underhill, *Mysticism*, 400.

¹¹ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (1952; reprint, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 274.

come naughted from selfhood," Rūmī teaches, "because there is no sin worse than being."¹² This language terrified me, as did Rabbi Nachman's description of self-nullification (*bittul*) as reaching the point where "your sense of self and physicality totally disappear, as if you were simply not in the world at all" so "you and everything with you will be merged in the Unity of God."¹³ It confirmed my worst fears about mysticism, whose goal, I believed, was becoming God through *undifferentiated* union and *annihilation* of self. Though I had experienced a shift in perspective from "Here am I" to "Your servant heareth," I was not prepared to sacrifice my *being* to follow the Way: I had worked too hard to *become* a visible, powerful self against my culture's, church's, and mother's attempts to nullify my existence.

Like most North American girls growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I absorbed the expectation that I would be no-thing: not-a-scholar, not-a-preacher, not-a-hero-of-faith, not-a-man.¹⁴ Tacitly, I understood I was to serve as the invisible nothing that enabled the something of the world of men to exist; the negative space that gave definition to the images drawn by men's actions. I was also aware of the restricted sphere in which I was to practice my vocation: I could raise children and teach them, play the organ in church, become a minister's wife or help my missionary husband in Africa or China—any and all hidden supports for men's public ministry. Watching daily how such servitude robbed my mother of her capacity to think, will, feel, and act freely and independently as an individual self in relation to the world, leaving her unsatisfied and resentful, I determined at thirteen never to fall victim to this trap.

Fated to be not only female but also Calvinist, I was trained to be another kind of nothing as well. The goal of spiritual formation in our Dutch Calvinist immigrant community was to instill in every member two correlated truths: God alone mattered and humankind was nothing. "To the glory of God!" was our motto. To praise Man was to diminish God's glory and therefore to sin. Let the anthropocentric Enlightenment and American culture laud Man and his achievements; we radical theocentrists knew we were worms crawling in the dirt, and it was our solemn countercultural duty to expose the vanity of all man's glories and train our children to avoid the sin of being. For many, this anthropology, commonly held to be antihumanist, defines Calvinism. When I studied John Calvin in divinity school, however, I discovered that this was a caricature of the reformer's anthropology, which, rather than being one-dimen-

¹² Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Mystical Poems of Rūmī*, 2 vols., trans. A. J. Arberry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 1:59.

¹³ Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, *Hisbodedut: The Divine Conversation: Selections from Rabbi Nachman's Advice*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1983), http://www.nachalnovea.com/breslovcenter/articles/article_conversation.html.

¹⁴ For a discussion of negative and "promising" consequences for women's spirituality as it has developed out of women's experience in a sexist world, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 100–16.

sional, combines a mystic's emphasis on radical humility before the One Who Dwells in Glory with both an Augustinian realism about humankind's capacity for sin *and* a Renaissance appreciation for the dignity of humankind. But when I was younger, I learned to aspire only to wormhood. If I dared dream otherwise, the refrain of the one song my mother ever wrote, the song the two of us sang together every week at our piano, would set me straight: "I am not worthy the least of His favors."

Many mothers unwittingly hand down the lessons of nothingness to their daughters; my mother intentionally sought to reduce me to nothing. She believed it was her God-given vocation as *mother* to cure me of the sin of being, to break my spirit, lest it rise up in pride and cost me eternal life and her too, for failing in her calling. For her, this end justified every means.

This apprenticeship in nothingness did not predispose me to regard annihilation of self and union with God as marks of a mature spiritual self. Having fought hard against the culture's drag toward my absorption in others' lives, I was not going to relinquish my self for the promised ecstasy of being swallowed up in the Whole. Having experienced union with a powerful being for whom the cost of relationship was annihilation of my self, I knew union was not necessarily a loving or liberating experience. What kind of God requires adults to sacrifice their unique selves to exist in love? Whatever God was, She was surely more than a Narcissist Writ Large. God, being God, was certainly able to include individuality in the greater Whole.

My Reformed theological convictions and Jewish formation reinforced this bias against annihilation and union. Both traditions teach the goodness of individual selfhood: God calls each being by name, gives each *individual* a unique task. For both, the difference between God and humankind is not a matter of degree but of kind: human beings are not made of the same substance as God; we are not, as mystics teach, "part of God," nor is God "the best part of us." This failure to keep Creator and creature distinct disturbed me when I first read Meister Eckhart's sermons in my twenties. Though drawn to Eckhart's stress on humility and everyday faithfulness, I balked at these words: "Therefore one should so live that he is identified with God's Son and so that he is that Son. Between the Son and the soul there is no distinction."¹⁵ To me all talk of shared divine substance and boundaryless union with God was blasphemy. Though aware of the Western tradition of communion mysticism, which retained a boundary between self and God, I believed all "true" mystics sought undifferentiated union.

For decades, my fear of losing my self and my deep-seated conviction of the radical distinction between God and humankind clouded my understanding of the mystics' nothing. I thought I knew what it meant: victory for the power-

¹⁵ Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 213.

ful, defeat for me. But after hearing Rukeyser's "not for me" the calling but for anyone, and learning to say not "Here am I" but "Your servant heareth," I was no longer sure I understood. What *did* nothing, annihilation of the self, and union mean in the lives of mystics?

Poverty of Self: Deheroization

In *The Niche of Lights*, al-Ghazālī argues that when the friends of God speak of annihilation of self and union with God, they are drunk. They sing: "I am He whom I love / And He whom I love is I!"¹⁶ It is clear, he says, that such language is metaphorical, not literal. In their zeal to declare the unity experienced intensely in love, these friends speak as lovers do, *as if* self and God are identical, *as if* the glass and the wine it holds are not distinct, though in reality they remain distinct. As if! That was what I had not been able to hear before, though Rabbi Nachman and others say it clearly: "*as if* you were simply not in the world at all." *As if* meant that the spirit and God were intimately united yet distinct, like lover and beloved.¹⁷ Suddenly, Steinsaltz's counsel to deny the existence of a separate self to become a chariot of the *Shekinah* made new sense to me: "One must become *another* self," he says, "someone who may still be *aware of oneself and of the closeness of God*, but for whom this is no longer *the chief reality*."¹⁸ "Nullification of self" was a metaphor for speaking of the need to displace one's self as the center of value. This language was necessary to witness to the self as humbled *in relation to* the One; it did not mean that individual selves did not exist and had nothing to give the world.

Another of Steinsaltz's Zoharic images opened my eyes wider to this understanding of nullification: the letters of the Torah are not formed by black fire against a white background; they are negative space, defined by the surrounding white fire of God.¹⁹ Like the letters of the alphabet, each of us is a negative space given definition by the One Who Encompasses All. *My* name is but the pattern God forms around the life given to *me*. As holy vessels, *k'li kodeshim*, we each have a unique shape, but that shape is nothing *in itself*; it exists in relation to God.

If this was what nullification of the self meant, the emptying of self to receive a particular task, the nothingness given shape by the One Who Limits Each Being, then perhaps I had misread not only mystics and mysticism but also all talk of the poverty and denial of the self. John Calvin's poetic summary

¹⁶ al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, ed. and trans. David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 18.

¹⁷ Ibn Al'Arabi makes this same point with a different metaphor: light filters through a prism and though the colors the prism reflects are united with the light, they remain distinct. See Ibn Al'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist, 1990), 91.

¹⁸ Steinsaltz, *Long Shorter Way*, 233 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

of the Christian life as denial of ourselves had dogged me for years: "We are not our own . . . let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's . . . Let . . . a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord."²⁰ What is this, I now realized, but the poverty of self that mystics teach is the beginning of the Way? Denial of self does not mean starving or beating the body or rejoicing in one's culturally determined victimization or random suffering. Rather, poverty of self, the practice of radical humility in following the Way, is a liberating way of being that is open not only to those we label mystics but also to all *ordinary* women and men of faith.

Discerning the difference between this self-naughting humility that delights in God taught by mystics and the corrosive humiliation of self taught by those who profit from keeping the other in its place—that was the challenge. A novella by Clarice Lispector taught me how to distinguish these two. *The Passion According to G. H.* renders an ordinary mystic's conversion from false to true humility, from ego to God, a process the character G. H. calls *deheroization*: "the deheroization of myself is undermining the ground beneath my edifice, doing so despite me like an unknown calling. Until it is finally revealed to me that life in me does not bear my name."²¹ In the process of being deheroized, awakening to this unknown calling, G. H. realizes that all her efforts at self-purification were not "goodness," for she "lacked the saint's humility."²² True humility, poverty of spirit, means letting go of one's self and taking the hand of another in love. Eating cockroaches and kissing lepers were false humility, for they were imitative gestures, attempts of a grasping self at heroic acts of self-abnegation meant to fill the hollow self with worth. True humility flows from a mature self; one can only empty one's self of an achieved fullness. "Deheroization is the grand failure of a life. Not everyone can fail because it is such hard work, one must first climb painfully up to get to the height to fall from—I can only achieve the depersonality of silence if I have first built an entire voice. My cultures were necessary to me so that I could climb up to have a point to come down from."²³ Humility is surrendering the richness of one's self to the unknown and so finding true wealth.

Before I met the ordinary mystic G. H., this truth, that the poverty of the self comes from giving away the wealth of the self, had been hidden from me. Of course, I knew by heart Jesus's words: *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall*

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.vii.1.

²¹ Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.*, trans. Ronald W. Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 169.

²² *Ibid.*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*

save it (Mark 8:35). I thought this meant martyrdom, sacrificing one's physical life to witness to the truth of the living God, the way Jesus, Rabbi Akiva, and others had done. I also thought it meant denying, suppressing, or killing my desires and self so that the love of God could live in my stead. The first I admired, the second I feared. Neither, I saw now, was all that Jesus was teaching. G. H. taught me how to hear the full paradox of his words: To save your life you must lose it; but one cannot lose what one does not have.

I saw, too, that losing one's self in this way was necessarily a *voluntary* act. As Rukeyser's poem says, "Nothing was speaking to me, but *I offered* and all was well." For years, I had been careful to distinguish between the voluntary suffering of martyrs such as Jesus and the involuntary, scripted suffering of women, Jews, and all others as the dominant culture's designated victims. Just as all persons, women and men, were called not to be passive victims, but to actively choose to live justly, even if those actions resulted in suffering, so both women and men were called not to resign themselves to an undervalued life, but to freely choose to live fully as a self humbled by nothingness, a self that no longer takes *itself* as reality but becomes part of the marvel orchard of the universe.

With the realization that one voluntarily surrenders one's fullness, I heard anew the paradoxical language of the awakened self of other mystics as well: Poverty of self is wealth of being; In freely denying one's desire, one gains the world; In sacrificing one's self, one wakes to abundant life; In emptying, one is filled; "Whatever you lose, you've won" (Lao Tzu); One is found by losing the way. Before, though I intellectually accepted the coexistence of mutually exclusive realities, I had found mystics' paradoxes obfuscating and frustrating. Before G. H., I did not see that the complex, surpassing reality being witnessed to *had* to be bent to be enclosed in language, and that in that bending to fit our reality the straight appears crooked. The language of paradox is no dodge, it is a necessity.

I wasn't yet convinced, however, that the life of a mystic was a liberating life. Despite that freeing "as if" and the necessary paradox of no-self in relation to God *and* self actively serving in the world, nullification and annihilation remained stumbling blocks. "Die before you die," says Muhammad. Voluntarily giving over the wealth of one's self is one thing, the sacrificial death of one's self quite another. The problem was this: I could not imagine a resurrected life of the spirit: that in giving away my wealth of I-hood, I would live in abundant life; that in giving myself to the unknown, to the One Who Enlivens All, I would not become lesser but greater. Again, it was G. H. who showed me this paradox at the heart of existence. What other mystics speak of as the annihilation that opens one to love, G. H. calls *desistance*:

I desist and to my human poverty there opens the only joy that is given me to have, human joy. . . . I desist and the less I am, the more alive, the more I lose my name, the more I am called. . . . And giving myself over

with the confidence of belonging to the unknown. For I can pray only to what I do not know. And I can love only the unknown evidence of things and can add myself only to what I do not know. Only that is a real giving of oneself. And such a giving of myself is the only surpassing that doesn't exclude me. I was now so much greater that I no longer saw myself.²⁴

Once I began to see that this death of the self led to Abundant Life, as a closed seed must die in the earth to emerge a lush plant, the mystics' talk of nullification and annihilation no longer frightened me as much. I began to understand what mystics as diverse as Rabi'a of Basra, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, Jonathon Edwards, and Pir Hazrat Inayat Khan meant when they insisted that true renunciation of self bears fruit in greater joy.

To be deheroized, to sacrifice one's ego, to dare to stop *insisting* on one's self, to lose the self in surrender to the unknown, is to wake up in earnest and live in joy. That is what I wanted. Part of my path was to form a self that could be unselfed, to find an I to freely lose; but now I saw that that hard-won self that had once been a worthy goal and honorable achievement had become an obstruction; to follow the Way, I had to cast it off. During the Dark Night of the Soul I experienced after giving up my vocation as a professor of theology, I had begun this surrender; but my recalcitrant ego had continued get in my way. It had to be left behind, if I wanted to live alive in a service of love. "The writer steps aside for the work," writes Edmond Jabès.²⁵ I understood the necessity of this, *as a writer*. Now I had to learn: the self steps aside for the work of the calling given to anyone. Humility is the spiritual virtue I claimed to cherish most. Now I had to live that truth and be transformed, like Rūmī's worm.

This is how a human being can change:
There's a worm addicted to eating
grape leaves.

Suddenly, he wakes up,
call it grace, whatever, something
wakes him, and he's no longer a worm.
He's the entire vineyard,
and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks,
a growing wisdom and joy
that doesn't need
to devour.²⁶

After decades of kicking against wormhood, I was a worm after all! Like Rūmī's worm, I had been devouring existence, addicted to discovering *my* calling, *my*

²⁴ Ibid., 171–73.

²⁵ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), 39.

²⁶ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Essential Rūmī*, trans. Coleman Burks (Edison, NJ: Castle, 1995), 265.

way. Then something—call it grace, call it poetry, call it the Divine Ironist's sense of humor or the relentless pursuit of the human heart—awakened me and I tasted being alive with and as the world, no need to devour.

Freely surrendering the wealth of one's I to come into one's "clear being; uncalled, alive, and sure" is a challenge that no one achieves without a strenuous battle and that few accomplish permanently. Again and again the self throws up barriers that must be torn away. But to be on the way to the Way—that is joy. I knew this, yet still I feared surrendering. "Don't be afraid," G. H. urges, "to *add yourself* to God's extreme energetic sweetness."²⁷ To overcome my fear, I had to discover that a deheroized self does not live in a passive state of private joy but is released into that "extreme energetic sweetness" to actively transform the world in love and justice.

Muleteers, Uncouth Carriage Drivers, and Deheroized Lives of Spirit

With the vision of the worm becoming the orchard, everything I thought I had understood about calling was turned on its head. Calling is not a set of special tasks given to each individual but a way of being that is open to everyone, a way of living abundantly, open heartedly, in the presence of the Alive; following the Way is not *what* one does, but *how* one does what one does as one lives each day: diapering a baby, studying Talmud, brushing one's teeth, analyzing ideas or psyches, repairing lawnmowers, arguing with one's partner or children, combing lice from scalps, praying. When the heart has awakened, everything and anything one does—in thought, feeling, word, deed—is the calling. The spiritual calling given to every human being is simply this: to become fully human.

To become truly human—that was what the heart was awakened for. Not to revel in an inner awareness of the One Who Enlivens All and one's personal liberation *from* I-hood. But to bear fruit, use its freedom *for* a transformed life of action in the world. The unselfed seeker had to go beyond enjoying the ecstasies of experience to participating in what Underhill calls a "willed response" to the Reality perceived, "a drastic and costly life-changing."²⁸ And world-changing, I would add. From my studies, I knew that for many mystics close communion with God issued in a vitality that led to action for justice, making them a powerful force for dissent and the transformation of society. I also knew that while mysticism was intensely individual it could also be profoundly communal, for example: early Christian cenobitic monks, Béguines and Beghards, Hasids, Moravians, the Catholic Worker Movement, and ordinary communities of Jews practicing "normal mysticism," that is, living together in holiness, which is "con-

cerned with daily conduct, with being gracious and merciful, with keeping oneself from defilement."²⁹

Knowing, however, that mysticism was not *necessarily* a retreat from the world but a way of living faithfully in the everyday world was not enough to dispel my prejudice that overall mystics pursued a solitary path, a private life of internal experiences with God that entailed withdrawal from the public realm. Having grown up in the tight embrace of a religious community, I couldn't imagine spiritual life without community. As a feminist, I was committed to acting in the public realm. Was I to renounce my hard-won gains as a woman in academia and literature to live alone in the desert like Saint Antony or Amma Theodora? I wasn't prepared to follow the Way if it meant becoming invisible and solitary.

Discovering that the calling was for anyone and that one set out on the Way when one surrendered one's self *in order to* live for God in all one's actions in the world made me wonder, "Have I been looking in the wrong places for evidence of the costly life-changing of a ripened spirit?" The mystics familiar to me were famous—for their writings, reforms of convent life, or social-justice leadership. Yet the lives of most seekers who surrender to the One Who Enlivens All, however, remain hidden. In my ignorance of the calling given to anyone and calling as a transformed way of being, I had assumed that to be hidden meant to withdraw from the world. Now I saw that it was not the faithful seekers of God who were hiding themselves away, abandoning the public arena for irresponsible interiority; it was I who could not see the hiddenness of ordinary mystics in the public realm. I had been blind to the heroes of the spirit living all around me, that host of ordinary persons alive to love who sacrifice their own desires, interests, and welfare every day for the sake of the good. The truly humble do not call attention to themselves, their teaching, or their work of compassion and justice; the calling is all. Because we cannot see them, we often mistake them for fools.

Mystics often tell stories to wake people up to the existence of these faithful seekers, whose true lives otherwise remain invisible to us. In one Sufi story, three high-ranking sheiks make a pilgrimage to Abdul Qadir (1077–1166 CE) only to discover it is not they who are received with honor and kisses by the "King" of Sufis, but the three muleteers who had guided their journey and whom they had disdained as silly and coarse. When they ask the chief muleteer how this can be, he tells them to get back to their prayers and mumblings, their Sufism and search for truth, which have plagued their journey together. "We are simple muleteers," he says, "and want nothing of that." This, says the storyteller,

²⁷ Linspector, *Passion According to G. H.*, 164 (emphasis added).

²⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 195.

²⁹ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), 194, 203.

is the difference between the hidden Sufis and the superficial ones.³⁰ Mature spirituality is lived out not in the prayers of the elite but in the hidden actions of ordinary persons.

The deepest truths and forces of our lives often are invisible to us. We look for the extraordinary, the crises, the turning points; we see only that what we are taught is the foreground. Waking to true humility in service of the Way, I began to wonder: Who are the muleteers I have passed over in ignorance and disdain? One of them certainly was my paternal grandmother, Willemina Meijer Potter. Raised in a family of fourteen in Zeeland, the Netherlands, she was sent to work as a dairymaid on a nearby farm before she had completed grammar school. To escape poverty and shame, she moved with her husband and sons to America, where she worked as a maid to rich Dutch immigrants. She would have been a wonderful nurse, my uncle told me: she loved caring for people. Whenever I stayed with her, she took me to the Ladies' Aid Society meeting in her church basement, where her friends, big-bosomed, perfume-sodden old ladies who spoke with thick brogues and favored flowery dresses, bulky stockings that bunched around their ankles, and black shoes as heavy as soldiers' boots, laughed, prayed, studied scripture, and worked. During World War II, they had knitted wool socks and sweaters for soldiers and refugees. When I visited, threading needles and picking up pins, they were embroidering pillowcases and crocheting baby booties and blankets to support missions abroad. While their fingers danced, they arranged who would visit shut-ins and the ill and who would deliver food or clothes to the needy.

Before, I had dismissed the image of this plump female circle of caring as a sentimental memory or a casualty of sexist Christianity. Marginalized women saddled with thankless tasks could not be role models for me. I had a *calling*: I would be an ordained minister and seminary professor, serving with recognition and authority. I would ascend the pulpit, not toil unseen in a dimly lighted basement; create with my mind not my hands; teach the powerful, not nurture the frail. Now I saw that these unglamorous women were quietly showing me another path of true followers of the Way: the self steps aside for the work. Without calling attention to themselves, they were living out the calling given to anyone. In feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, not hiding from the flesh of others, they were fulfilling the prophetic vision of compassion and justice in Isaiah 58:10: "And if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall your light rise in darkness." In going about their work calmly, with no hope of reward or desire for recognition, in genuine humility

³⁰ The modern Sufi master Idries Shah retells this tale in his *Tales of the Dervishes* (London: Octagon, 1982), 178–79. He notes that Hasids tell a similar tale about Rabbi Gabriel, a disciple of the great Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk (d. 1809 CE), failing to recognize his carriage driver as a hidden *tzaddik* (righteous one). See Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 1:263.

and love, they were like Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Though constrained by sexism and hidden, Dorothea *nevertheless* transformed the world.

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.³¹

On such hidden acts and lives our world depends, the narrator says, and the novelist George Eliot brought many of those hidden lives, like Dorothea's, to light.

All around us there are women and men constricted by personal or political circumstances, who nevertheless freely choose to sacrifice their lives, surrender the claims of the self, for the good of others, without self-pity, complaint, fanfare, or expectation of reward, recognition, or visibility. Their work in the world bears fruit in greater justice for others and greater joy for themselves. Following the Way often means living a hidden, unhistoric life of acts of love and compassion that flow from a self emptied of its fullness. For G. H., as for many Hasids and other mystics, this hiddenness extends even to those acting selflessly in the world. Though "all of life is a secret mission" that we are "born entrusted with," we realize the true labor of our lives only after that secret mission is finally carried out, that is, when we die.³²

From *Ressentiment* to the Liberating Paradox of Self/No-Self

G. H., Dorothea Brooke, my grandmother—these deheroized women of spirit, once hidden to me, have become my guides. I began to move toward the calling given to anyone: surrendering the full self I had become to follow the Way. Following the Way was all; *everything* I did or did not do was part of this way of being, living in the wealth of Spirit—mothering as well as publishing. The self steps aside for the work.

Having spent my life *craving* opportunities to preach, lecture, give readings, exercise public authority, be recognized, visible and audible, I now cast aside that craving for self and opened myself to a life lived in, toward, and for the One. Having tasted the belonging that frees one to serve selflessly in the world, I wanted to serve like these women. This did not necessarily mean *deliberately* choosing to live a life like theirs, an unhistoric life hidden to others; for

³¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1874; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 682.

³² Lispector, *Passion According to G. H.*, 168–69.

the patriarchal constraints they labored under and against are not mine. What it did mean was learning to live a life hidden to myself, without the claims of I or mine, for *my* service could no more be the goal than *my* salvation or ascent to spiritual heights. To be *aware* of my selfness or insist on it in any way meant straying from the Way. Rūmī prays: “May I never have a soul, / if my soul after tasting his wine and / being drunk with his beauty / is self-aware.”³³

It was the need for living as no-self that I could not or would not grasp before. During my intellectual formation, social constructs had led me to believe there were two mutually exclusive ways of being: one was either a separate, independent self or no-self; the first was required of men, the second of women. This dichotomy plagued me once I became a mother. The fierce ambivalence Jane Lazarre uncovered in her experience of mothering small children in a sexist society characterized my twenty years of mothering.³⁴ It wasn't simply the patriarchal bind that chafed, but the *necessity* for any parent or guardian to set self aside for the good of the child. I believed in sacrificing for one's children and willingly chose to do so, yet I couldn't stop feeling that this was hindering my true work in the world. Before becoming a mother, I had castigated Augustine for abandoning his beloved concubine and son to devote himself to God. After, I envied Augustine his choice to live as an individual self. Both are false judgments issuing from a false dichotomy, but I could not see it then, for I did not know that living out the hidden selflessness of family life is as much a part of following the Way as fighting genocide in Bosnia.

In the first excitement of my conversion to a feminist perspective, I reveled in intentionally choosing to become what had been denied me: a distinct self directly effective in the world. I was practicing what Max Scheler calls *ressentiment*, the “illusory valuation” in which “the fox does not say that sweetness is bad, but that the grapes are sour.”³⁵ Any argument, he says, that tries to create a new system by simply inverting the old value system rather than completely transforming it remains imprisoned in dichotomous logic: it overvalues what was previously undervalued and defines spiritual values by negatively *comparing* them to the previous worldview. If, according to the old way, women were passive vehicles, now we would be active selves making our mark on the world; if our nothingness was valorized, we would eschew it. This *in itself* is not revolutionary thinking but a lack of imagination; it remains wholly dependent on the former way of thinking. Genuine revolution requires that one move beyond flipping old values on their heads to transforming them, that is, determining

³³ Rūmī, *Mystical Poems*, 1:108.

³⁴ Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1971), 74.

liberating values for all persons and beings within inclusive, “self-transcending societies” of responsibility.³⁶

Now that I had heard Clarice Lispector's and other mystics' liberating call to deheroization, I was challenged to integrate this into my view of mature spirituality. I did not want to say, “Because patriarchal culture devalues women's receptivity, I will glorify it; because sexism has not seen or counted the work of my grandmother or other women of spirit, I will now elevate this hidden way of serving as *the* way for women or even all persons.” I am not interested in defeatist, compensatory, or illusory thinking about women's spiritual maturation.

We need a new vision of deeply lived spiritual experience: a broader communal vision that embraces the positive value of public, noisy work *and* of work that is hidden, whether performed by women or men; and a complex vision of individual spirituality that recognizes the life-giving paradox of self active in the world *and* no-self in relation to the One, acknowledging the coexistence of these incommensurates in both women's and men's lives. Such a vision is nourished not only by the language of paradox but also the language of “as if,” which points beyond univocal meaning to multivalent living. When the self steps aside for the work, when it is humbled in such a way that it is liberated to work joyfully for love and justice in the world, it does not claim to be one with God, but experiences itself as part of the marvel orchards, “as if” one with God. If we live toward this vision, live as ears listening for the calling given to anyone, awakening to the Way through the marvel orchards, surrendering the self's abundance to taste clear being, perhaps we too, together, will arrive at the powerful green hill.

EMBODIED EMBEDDED MYSTICISM: AFFIRMING THE SELF AND OTHERS IN A RADICALLY INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

Carol P. Christ

I have had a mystical relationship with nature for as long as I can remember. I was brought from the hospital to my grandmother's home and garden that backed onto the Los Angeles County Arboretum. My earliest memory includes peacocks screeching on the roof above my crib—sounds that while frightening or eerie to others are as dear to me as the world itself. As a child, I climbed the peach tree when it was blossoming magically in three colors, fed bread to the peacocks and watched them spread their magnificent green and blue tails, ducked through a hole in the fence with my grandmother for walks in the arbo-

³⁶ For this term and an analysis of the difference between determining values within closed and open societies, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 87, 69–89.

return where we discovered something new each time. I ran through vacant lots filled with yellow mustard flowers, hiked through the dusty scrub brush in the hills at San Dimas Park, and felt myself becoming one with crashing breakers and undulating waves in the Pacific Ocean.

Thinking back, I would have to say that unlike Muriel Rukeyser, I never felt the voices of nature calling *my* name. The experiences I had were not about me. Rather they were about being part of a world of stunning beauty: vast, serene, delicate, and powerful. In college, I wrote on "Nature Imagery in the Prophets" because I truly believed that "the trees of the field" would "clap their hands" on the day of redemption—not because God would save Israel (or me), but because God cares about trees. Like Alice Walker's Shug, I understood that God loves all beautiful things. I suspect that when Rukeyser saw "colors of orchards, gold behind gold," she too was responding to the particular beauty of other living things (cited in Engel, 143).

Although like Mary Engel I have attempted to understand the relation of feminism and mysticism, I am not persuaded by her attempt to reclaim the mystical language of annihilation, surrender, or sacrifice for feminist understandings of the self or of God. I too am critical of the independent heroic egotistical self that Western cultures valorize. I suppose that when such a self gets "too big for its britches" it can be "brought down" by being "clobbered over the head" by God. However, I find the "club" that "annihilates" the self to be an inferior teaching tool—not one any Goddess I might worship would choose. My reasons for rejecting the mystical language of surrender and annihilation of self are philosophical, metaphysical, and theological.¹ I believe that the language of surrender or annihilation of self found in mystical traditions is rooted not only in images of God as a dominating other but also in dualistic metaphysical notions of divine transcendence found in classical theism. Feminists have criticized images of God as a dominating other (Lord, King, Father) and the dualisms (transcendence and immanence, mind and body, rational and irrational, male and female) that have shaped Western theology. However, most of us have dismissed metaphysical questions about the nature of God as abstract and irrelevant to our attempts to change the world. Yet it is precisely the nature of God that is at stake in Engel's attempt to reclaim the language of surrender, annihilation, and sacrifice of the self to God. Therefore, I do not believe we can avoid metaphysical questions.

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, I borrowed the terms *mystical experience* and the *experience of nothingness* from mystical traditions, using them to de-

¹ In traditional terms, these questions have to do with philosophical anthropology (theory of human life), philosophical theology (theory of God), and cosmology (theory of the nonhuman or other-than-human world).

scribe "women's spiritual quest" in literature written by black and white women.² I suggested that the mystical tradition's language of "dark night of the soul" and the "experience of nothingness" in which "nothing is beyond questioning, sacred, immobile" provided alternatives to the psychological labels "depression," "breakdown," and "madness," which were often affixed to the sense of emptiness many women felt when they began to challenge the values of patriarchal dominator societies.³

However, I was aware that classic definitions of mystical experience did not precisely fit the experiences depicted by the women whose work I studied—or my own. I questioned the emphasis on "transcendence" in conventional definitions of mysticism, for example in R. C. Zaehner's notion that in mystical experience "sense perception and discursive thought are transcended in an immediate apperception of a unity lying beyond and transcending the multiplicity of the world as we know it."⁴ I suggested that women's mystical experiences were often found within the world, in what I called "nature mysticism" and "social or communal mysticism."⁵ I rejected the value judgment that so-called immanent mysticism is less valuable than so-called transcendental forms of mysticism that have the goal of rising above the body and out of the world.⁶ I also found that whereas the literature of mysticism spoke of "passivity" before the divine and "renunciation" of the ego, women writers seemed to be saying that mystical experience produced "self-awareness" and "self-confidence."⁷ I concluded that "women's quest is for a wholeness in which the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotion are overcome."⁸

In the second edition of *Diving Deep*, I spoke of my use of the language of the mystical tradition as a "deformation of language" in which a new context gives "different meaning" to traditional concepts.⁹ Although I did not then recognize that the metaphysical framework of process philosophy could have helped me articulate the understanding of spiritual experience I was struggling to express, I was reinventing some of the central insights of process philosophy when I wrote:

The "deformation" of mystical language I was and am proposing is that we give up the quest to ally ourselves with a transcendent source or power which is beyond change, which is unaffected by that which comes

² Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980, 1986, 1995). Citations to *Diving Deep* are from the third edition (1995).

³ *Ibid.*, 13–18. The definition of the "experience of nothingness" is Michael Novak's; see his *The Experience of Nothingness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

⁴ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–23.

⁶ Especially in the preface to the second edition (*ibid.*, xiii–xiv).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

into being and dies. For me the goal of the "mystical" quest is to understand that we are part of a world that is constantly transforming and changing.¹⁰

In *She Who Changes*, I suggested that process philosophy could help feminists clarify and sharpen our criticism of (androcentric) theological traditions based upon classical notions of transcendence.¹¹ In most Western theological traditions, divinity is defined as absolute, infinite, and unchanging, and thus utterly transcendent of the finite and changing world. Divinity is unknowable because the finite cannot encompass the infinite. Anything finite that approaches the infinite must surrender to or be consumed by infinite power. This view is dualistic in its assertion that there is a transcendent realm entirely separate from the changing world. The mystical tradition of a dark night of the soul in which all intellectual certainties are questioned and in which the finite self is annihilated is one expression of the human response to the infinite and unknowable God of classical theism.

The notion that divinity is radically or wholly other is intrinsic to Western thinking about God. Theologians from Thomas Aquinas to Paul Tillich to Karl Rahner have asserted that transcendent Being or Being-Itself is so totally other than the self and the world as to be fundamentally unknowable. The notion that God is the wholly or Holy Other was claimed as the universal essence of religion by Protestant Rudolf Otto. According to Melissa Raphael, Otto's views have been "more influential in the history of religions than any other. Gerardus Van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade and to some extent, Tillich have all depended on Otto's account of the numinous as the defining essence of religious consciousness."¹² The conception of the divine as utterly transcendent is also found in Protestant neo-orthodoxy—in Karl Barth's depiction of divine freedom as unrestricted and in H. Richard Niebuhr's conception of radical monotheism.

Feminists have argued that dualistic traditions are implicitly and explicitly antifemale. Because the body through which we are born into the changing physical world is female, it is nearly inevitable that femaleness will become symbolic of the changing world and the body that must be transcended. In dualistic visions, the processes of the changing female body including menstruation, pregnancy, birth, nursing, and menopause cannot be affirmed as sacred or as reflecting the sacred. In this situation, as Grace Jantzen has shown, immortality

¹⁰ Ibid., xiv.

¹¹ Carol P. Christ, *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Also see Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), and Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984).

¹² See Melissa Raphael, "Feminism, Constructivism, and Numinous Experience," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 511–26, quotation on 512.

(and death) rather than natality (birth and life) becomes the focus of theological traditions.¹³

Feminist theologians have proposed holistic visions in which the body, in general, and the female body, in particular, as well as the earth body and the world body, can be affirmed. Yet rather than criticizing the dualistic assumptions of classical theism, feminist theologians have frequently appealed to the notion of radical transcendence found within it to relativize images and conceptions alleged to be divinely authorized. Roman Catholic feminists (following early Mary Daly) have used the notion of the *via negativa* as found in Roman Catholic mystical traditions to question the authority of traditional symbols and theologies. Mary Ann Beavis summarizes the views of many Roman Catholic (and other) feminists when she lists "three characteristics of language about the divine enumerated by E[lizabeth] A. Johnson: (1) that the divine is fundamentally unknowable; (2) that all speech about God is analogical and metaphorical; and (3) that no one image or name suffices to comprehend the divine mystery."¹⁴ Protestant and Jewish feminists, including Sallie McFague and Judith Plaskow, have made the analogous argument that divine transcendence is radically or wholly other in order to relativize the authority of their traditions.¹⁵ After reviewing a significant body of feminist work on God, Protestant Laurel Schneider concluded that feminist theology must assume God's radical otherness, for only from this standpoint can feminists relativize the language and conceptions about the divine handed down in traditions.¹⁶ In making this theological move, feminist theologians are cleverly using tradition against itself. Yet as Audre Lorde warned long ago, the master's house cannot be dismantled using the master's tools.

The notion of radical transcendence is good for knocking down idols that human hands and minds have created, but it is not very helpful in the process of reimagining the divine. The notion that God is essentially unknowable or mysterious or radically and wholly other tells us absolutely nothing about who or what God or Goddess is. It provides no guidance (for example) on the question of whether it is appropriate to think of God or Goddess as a King or a Queen or as a Lord or a Lady of War at all—or whether we should abandon such images because they envision divine power as domination. As a feminist theologian, I want to argue that images of God as a dominator are not only relative and therefore not final and ultimate—but also (as best I can tell) are fundamentally

¹³ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Mary Ann Beavis, "I like the Bird: Luke 13.34, Avian Metaphors and Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 1 (September 2003): 119–28, quotation on 127.

¹⁵ See Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (London: SCM Press, 1987); and Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

¹⁶ Laurel C. Schneider, *Re-imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998).

wrong! In order to assert that, I need to know more than that God is mysterious and unknowable, radically and wholly other.

The notion that the self must be annihilated or surrender or sacrifice itself in the presence of the divinity is firmly rooted in dualistic traditions in which God is defined as utterly transcendent. Such notions of God surely do relativize the allegedly independent or egotistical self. But again, they do so with a very blunt instrument. From within classical theism's notion that God is "all" and the world is "nothing," we cannot distinguish what kind of a self is being annihilated, surrendered, or sacrificed—whether it is an egotistical self, a soluble or underdeveloped self, or an appropriately responsive and responsible self.¹⁷ Nor can we tell whether the person who emerges from such annihilation, surrender, or sacrifice will be focused narcissistically on self-abuse, masochism, and the like, or whether she or he will be loving, compassionate, and caring toward other individuals and the self.

For these and other reasons, I do not believe that the dualistic assumptions of classical theism can support feminist theologies and theologies that wish to affirm the female body, other bodies, natality, the earth body, and the world body. Because they are rooted in dualistic traditions, notions of divine unknowability and mystery and of radical divine otherness are not the appropriate beginning points for feminist theologies and theologies. These notions leave intact the dualistic assumption that God is utterly unlike and separate from the physical world. In using them, feminists wittingly or unwittingly reinscribe the understanding that God relates to the world as a dominant and distant other, as a shatter of illusions or a judge.

In order to criticize the assumptions of classical theism, feminists must engage in metaphysics: we must discuss the nature of the divine, the self, and the world. This is where process philosophy can be helpful.¹⁸ Process philosophy not only criticizes classical theism but also provides an alternative view of divinity, humanity, and the world. Process philosophy envisions Goddess/God as intimately involved with an interdependent world, enjoying, suffering with, and remembering the lives of every individual in the universe in the best possible way. For process philosophy, Goddess/God is the most sympathetic of all sympathetic beings in a thoroughly relational world made up of interdependent individuals, both human and other than human. Process philosophy asserts that life is meant to be enjoyed, celebrating life or natality rather than focusing on death and immortality. Process philosophy affirms that all lives in the universe including the life of Goddess/God occur in bodies that are inherently good insofar as they are the location of life. Process philosophy does not deny that

¹⁷ See Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), for the definition of the "soluble" self or overly relational self as underdeveloped and just as problematic as the "independent" self valued in Western traditions.

¹⁸ For a fuller explication of the ideas that follow, see Christ, *She Who Changes*.

suffering exists; it attributes suffering both to chance and to choice but not to divine will. While process philosophy agrees with traditional views that all human knowing is partial and fragmentary, it does not take the further step of asserting that therefore we can know nothing of Goddess or God. Process philosophy boldly affirms that the love of Goddess/God for the world is something like the love we can know in relationships in the world and that the care and concern that Goddess/God offers to every individual in the world is something like the care and concern we can offer each other. In sharp contrast to classical theism, process philosophy argues that Goddess/God is more known than unknown because Goddess/God is in the world and the world is in Goddess/God.¹⁹ Process philosophy rejects all language and understandings that suggest that God is in any way a distant or dominating other. He is not a king, a tyrant, a bully, or man of war. She is not a queen, a withholding or controlling mother, or a wielder of a battle-ax. The nature or character of Goddess/God is not unknown but to a large extent known, not a mystery but rather an intimately experienced reality, not judgment by a wholly other but rather the felt presence of a fellow sufferer who understands,²⁰ of a sister who loves our daily grace.²¹ The Goddess/God of process thinking does not demand or require surrender or annihilation of the self but rather inspires all individuals to relate empathetically and sympathetically to others and to the self.

Process philosophy suggests that a feminist mysticism can be an embodied embedded mysticism that affirms the presence of the divine in physical and material reality and in selves.²² Embodied mysticism is felt in the body, for example in eating and drinking or in dancing or making love or in climbing the peach tree—not in negation of the self or the body through ascetic practices. Embedded mysticism does not seek to annihilate the self, nor to rise above the world, but to feel the feelings of other individuals in the world ever more deeply. Embedded mysticism is the sense of being part of a larger whole that is infused with the presence of the divine. This larger whole includes both human and other-than-human life. There is no place in embodied embedded mysticism for the notion that the divine exists apart from the physical world or that our goal is to deny the self or physical body in order to connect with immaterial or transcendent divinity. In contrast to philosophies rooted in classical dualisms,

¹⁹ Technically speaking, the idea that the world is the body of God can be attributed to Charles Hartshorne but not to Alfred North Whitehead.

²⁰ This phrase is Whitehead's. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351.

²¹ This is a paraphrase of Susan Griffin in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 223.

²² Charlene Spretnak was the first to use of the terms *embodied* and *embedded* together to describe ecofeminist sensibility. See Charlene Spretnak, "Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, and Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 425–36.

process philosophy affirms all bodies and the world as the body of Goddess/God. Because it corrects the theological mistakes that arose from denying the female body through which we are born into the world, process philosophy can provide grounding for a feminist understanding of mysticism. Process philosophy provides a conceptual framework that is compatible with embodied embedded mysticism. It also suggests that the appropriate method for feminist work in religion is not the *via negativa*, but a *via positiva*, reflection on embodied embedded life.²³

The feminist process paradigm I proposed in *She Who Changes* can help us think more clearly about the categories of mysticism I identified in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*. Nature mysticism and social or communal mysticism can be more fully understood and related to each other when they are rooted in the process understanding of the world as the divine body. Nature mysticism is the sense of being intimately connected to a landscape or part of a landscape, for example, a river or a tree or a wild animal. Such experiences can inspire the intellectual insight that human life is part of a web of life that is sacred because it forms the divine body. In *Diving Deep*, I also wrote about the intense experience of wholeness and well-being and the sense of being part of a larger stream of life that can occur in sexual encounter. In this sense, sexual mysticism like nature mysticism can create an opening to the larger whole, the web of life, the world that is the divine body. This kind of mystical experience is not limited to sexual encounters. When we live fully in our bodies, it can occur in any physical experience, from swimming in the sea to tying one's shoes to chopping onions, as Audre Lorde noted in "Uses of the Erotic."²⁴ In *Diving Deep*, I spoke of social and communal mysticism as the sense of being part of the whole that comes through participation in social and political movements. When we understand the world as the divine body, we can more easily see efforts to create greater harmony within it as sacred. Each of these kinds of mysticism can also be defined as embodied embedded mysticism, a sensing through the body of connection to the larger whole or web of life of which we are a part and to the divine power that is the ground and sustainer of all being and becoming.

Like its counterpart transcendental mysticism, embodied embedded mysticism has ethical consequences. While transcendental mysticism may encourage us to escape the body and the world as the locus of suffering, embodied embedded mysticism returns us to our bodies and turns us to the world, reminding us that this world, which includes both birth and death, is meant to be enjoyed. Our goal is to rejoice in the beauty that we can experience in cocreated life and

²³ Hartshorne asserts that God must be the most relational of all relational beings, the most sympathetic or empathetic, and so on, because these are the qualities that have the highest value in our world, reflectively considered.

²⁴ Reprinted in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 208–13.

to repair the web, widening the possibilities for joy and understanding in our own bodies, in other bodies, in the earth body, and in the world body. Where suffering occurs unnecessarily it is tragic, for there is no other world but this one in which it can be redeemed. By deepening our experience of connections to all beings in the web of life, embodied embedded mysticism inspires us to transform the attitudes, actions, and structures that create unnecessary suffering. Embodied embedded mysticism grounds Alice Walker's prayer and call to action: "Anything we love can be saved."²⁵

To conclude, I suggest that embodied embedded mysticism and a feminist process paradigm provide firmer foundations for feminist theologies and theologies than transcendent mysticism, the *via negativa*, notions of radical divine otherness, and the inherently antifemale and dualistic understandings in which they are rooted.

LIBERATING LIFE

M. Shawn Copeland

In this essay, Mary Engel shares her fitful, gradual discovery "that the life of a mystic [is] a liberating life" (152), a truly human way of living, that repudiates false humility, self-abnegation, and isolation. Indeed, Engel charts for us the obstacles she has overcome in understanding that liberating life as identical to daily following of the Way that Jesus of Nazareth taught. To follow his Way is to listen attentively, that is, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," to enter into intimate, loving communion with the Divine, and to act in compassionate solidarity with the "least" of the world (Matthew 22:37–39). Moreover, following the Way is ordinary living, full of unease and heart-wrenching risks and joys small and large. Engel's discovery places her in the company of searchers and seekers of diverse religious traditions and sensibilities—all of whom quest for a whole, humane, truly human life.

In one characterization, the word *mysticism* conjures an esoteric, otherworldly world of detachment and withdrawal, of extreme asceticism and privation, of passivity and surrender. On such presumption, mysticism appears strange, even bizarre. In another description, mysticism refers to a cluster of practices, traditions, and discourses emerging from religious experiences that turn and steady the human person in dynamic relationship with the Holy. On this presumption, mysticism stretches the contours of conventional religious traditions, settles on their borders, and searches restlessly for union with the holy, indeed, union with all creation.

²⁵ See Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997).

Engel will affirm the latter account, but not without confronting, wrestling with, and embracing the paradoxes of the “spiritual life,” or what Evelyn Underhill calls “that full and real life for which [one] is made; a life that is organic and social, essentially free yet with its own necessities and laws.”¹ These necessities and laws, these paradoxes ring familiar: to save one’s life is to lose it, self-control is to be found in self-surrender, self-fulfillment is to be achieved through self-emptying. “*Nada, nada, nada*,” St. John of the Cross teaches us, leads to *todo*, to all. Nothing, nothing, nothing and even at the peak of the mountain nothing.²

Any woman who seeks authentically a path to holiness, to self-transcendence recognizes these difficulties and ambiguities, the fear and desire; like Engel, she trembles. Spiritualized notions such as annihilation or repression of self, dissolution or union, desire and passion, humility and surrender are coated decisively in Western cultures with patriarchal patina. Indeed, for a critical feminist, developing and sustaining a spiritual life is a serious challenge. This requires, as Engel observes, “Discerning the difference between this self-naughting humility that delights in God taught by mystics and the corrosive humiliation of self taught by those who profit from keeping the other in its place” (151).

Engel reminds us that Christian mysticism is one among several paths in living toward holiness, wisdom, or mystical knowledge; but each path calls for keen attentiveness to the situations of human others and of the world. This reminder echoes the writings of many seekers whether Buddhist nun Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron or Carmelite Teresa of Avila, whether the Dalai Lama or Trappist monk Thomas Merton, whether Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Muslim mystic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Each woman and man in her and his own search of holiness sought to live out of the depths of spiritual experience, to enlarge consciousness and horizon, to include rather than exclude all creation.

A recurring leitmotif in Engel’s essay is the paradox of hiddenness. From tacit acceptance of the hidden support work of women, whether at home or in the church, to a grasp of truths that had been hidden from her, from a notion of mystics as hiding from the world to an awareness of mystics hidden within the world, Engel sketches out her deepening understanding of mystics as women and men who exercise responsible interiority and asceticism for the common good. Reflecting on the life of her paternal grandmother, Willemina Meijer Potter, Engel comes to understand the immigrant woman’s “unglamorous” (156) life as one that radiated enough beauty to transform her world.

This modest, perhaps unassuming essay offers a glimpse into a woman’s

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (1937; reprint, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1996), 41.

² John of the Cross, “The Ascent of Mount Carmel,” in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed., trans. Kiernan Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 110.

interior life and offers a needed balm to postmodernity’s dis-ease, restlessness, and fragmentation.

AUTHORING A MULTIPLICITY OF SELVES AND NO-SELF Wonhee Anne Joh

I deeply appreciate this opportunity to read Mary Engel’s provocative, evocative, and honest essay. I hope I can respond in kind: honestly with a mixture of personal and intellectual self-reflexivity. The education I received in North America privileged individuality and the virtue of progress of the individual—constantly becoming something better. For me, this emphasis on the progress of the individual’s interior life, while seemingly virtuous to my Methodist upbringing, verges dangerously at times on becoming not too different from Western capitalist consumption. It can even consume and “colonize” ways and practices of others in the unconscious bid for constant renewal and self-improvement of the interior life.

The work of decolonizing the Western imaginary, in this case theological and spiritual, is something that I grew up with and has shaped the ways I navigate my feminist critique of the separate but relational self and of the dominant ethos of the Korean American immigrant church, which tends to be strongly committed to what Engel refers to as the “no-self,” which comes from a mixture of Daoism and Mahayana Buddhism. Growing up in a religiously pluralistic context, I was well aware of the practice of no-self making its way and hybridizing with the Christian understanding of kenosis. As postcolonial thinkers have often noted, colonization dynamics leave their marks upon both colonizers and colonized, leaving nothing untouched. The interstitial site of the colonial divide is fraught with imprints of conflicting and colliding ways of being in and relating to the world and with one another. Saying that this is merely the “clash of civilizations” is too simplistic. Rather, colonization is also marked with what Homi Bhabha has termed *practices of spectacular resistance*.¹ Such practices emerge through a refusal to foreclose ways of being in the world that colonizers disavow but also through openness to excavating and reclaiming already foreclosed practices.

As a Christian growing up in North America, I learned that this self-improvement or “sanctification” followed a linear progression, whereby one improved the self more and more as time went on. This theological simplicity was allowed to make its dent in my consciousness. Along with this was also a significant but simple caricatured form of Calvinism.

In reading Engel’s journey of the self into no-self, I found many shared

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

experiences but also aspects that were probably very different. She refers to her up-bringing in the Dutch Calvinist immigrant church. The differences in our experiences become much more crystallized for me in this regard. I was nurtured in a Korean American immigrant church. My church context, and by default my education, was almost always multivalent and assumed a multiplicity of spiritual practices due to the presence of both cultural and religious plurality.

I felt during my youth that the Korean American immigrant church had its own theological interpretations and practices. These practices were always very much like the white "Methodist" practices but there were also aspects that were at the same time "not quite" like those of white Methodist churches. Of course, we shared in the larger denomination's theological heritage but I always understood that there were nuanced theological differences present shaped not only by our immigrant experiences but also by our experiences as the other.

My observations and questions regarding Engel's essay emerge out of my own particular spiritual journey as a Korean American feminist theologian, one deeply committed to the project of decolonization of the Western imaginary of religious and spiritual practices. In no way do I assume any position of "purity" or "authenticity," but through my reading of Engel's essay, I want to suggest that perhaps we must be attuned, open, and awakened to a multiplicity of spiritual ways of being in the world that the colonization project might previously have foreclosed through its matrices of power shaped by patriarchy, heteronormativity, imperialism, or racism. Below, I offer some general observations and questions that my mind generated in response to Engel's essay that I believe warrant further conversation.

In her journey of finding a way of "being and living with God," Engel makes problematic what has been a central feminist critique of patriarchy's use of the "undifferentiated self" and the call for the "annihilation of the self" that is fundamental to following the Way of mystical spirituality. Long shaped by feminism, Engel argues that the notion of the "undifferentiated self" was something that she, as a good feminist, found to be one of the central projects of feminist critique. In order for the individuated self to become herself, a woman should learn to be not only separate but also independent. Confessions of her earlier suspicion regarding mysticism were precisely because mysticism seemed to go against such feminist critique in its call for what essentially sounded like the loss of what little self a woman might have found—mysticism called for the "annihilation of the self." I agree with her suspicions, and as a person who grew up with precisely this "mixed" message of what it means to practice certain spirituality but also to be a good feminist, I make here my own confession that I am still caught, struggling in the middle.

I wonder to what extent we should still hold ourselves responsible to a paradigm that is binaristic (in the sense of either "self" or "other") and within a structure that demands we think in terms of either/or. I do not think that we can properly understand the annihilation of the self in all its depth and breadth

unless we do so out of a radically different paradigm. As such, what we need is a major shift in our feminist episteme that is radically open to ways of being in the world that might even be different from the tradition of Western Enlightenment liberalism. I find the notion of the "annihilation of the self" a meaningful part of my spirituality of resistance and transformation—individual and social—when I understand it as a call to practice emptying out of the self so that I might better let a multiplicity of selves into my being in the world. Such emptying out and letting in gives birth to a "co-arising" of many selves in relation with, to, and for one another. The annihilation of self then is a call to practice a kind of way of being in the world whose arch is bent toward the other. To use Gayatri Spivak's term, such a way of being in the world, bent and directed toward the other, is a kind of love that seeks to slowly make possible a *non-coercive rearrangement of desire*.² To be sure, Engel's call for "deheroization" as a form of letting go of one's self and "taking the hand of another in love" is precisely such a practice that allows for the possibility of "non-coercive rearrangement of desire"—our interior life of desire, as well as our desire for social transformation. In our search for the no-self, especially by us feminists trained in and through structures rooted in Western Enlightenment liberalism, I hope that we are not completely turned away from our collective efforts at public and social transformation in our search for an inclusive alternative to the virtue of individualism. It seems to me that there are times when those of us who might have attained some level of just relationships might be tempted to retreat into a privatized sense of no-self that nevertheless is still rooted in the individual self. After all, we should not lose sight of the fact that the call to no-self emerges out of the collective need and desire for many selves. As feminism continues to examine other possible ways of being in the world and with one another, in ways that might have been previously foreclosed, I find this essay timely and thought provoking. It challenges all of us to practice even greater openness to one another, bending ourselves into the direction of the other. There is a call here for deeper love and emptying out of one's self into the world.

I want to add here a minor observation, which comes also through my feminist postcolonial sensibility. On several occasions, the essay makes reference to "the Way," but with little or no definition of what is meant here by the term. It is not that I am calling for any kind of "authenticity" or "purity," some special definition that I might recognize as the right one. Recall also that I am familiar with hybrid forms of spirituality predominant in the Korean American Christian practices, and in this context, a Daoist use of "the Way" very frequently and easily merged with the "Way" of Jesus in my immigrant context. So there are many possible and hybrid meanings of "the Way." I wonder why there are no specific references, other than to Rūmī, where concepts like "the Way" are used

² Gayatri C. Spivak, "Use and Abuse of Human Rights," *boundary 2*, 32, no. 1 (2005): 131–80, esp. 148.

in this essay. One predominant manner in which colonizing projects carry out their discursive power is through “borrowing” intellectual, spiritual, cultural, religious, and political practices of others and forgetting to acknowledge such borrowing or learning. Some of the greatest Western intellectuals learned much from the vast knowledge/s of “the East” without ever acknowledging such learning. If we are not cautious and mindful of careless inattentiveness, I fear that we might be making the same colonizing mistake.

In spite of my concern over this last matter, Engel’s decolonization of the Western imaginary is inclusive of its spiritual practices. Decolonization is not about restoration of some allegedly pure and authentic precolonial way, but, rather, is an imaginative creation of what we might call a new form of consciousness and way of life. Colonizing impulses often arose from the need to civilize, to transform, to improve, to practice agency, and to become “heroes” in the colonizer’s mind. Engel’s call for “deheroization” of the self is at the heart of the decolonizing process and a call to reexamine spiritual practices that have been foreclosed to us either by the shortcomings of feminism, brutal repression of patriarchy, or devastation of colonization.

For me, this essay generated many thoughts regarding feminist theologians’ dis/location and to the unsettling fact that we are often in the process of finding our identities while always losing them. Perhaps it would be better to speak less of “finding” and “losing” identities and more of deepening and broadening our understandings of the self and of others, so we might live more fully with one another in a mutual co-arising of many selves. This in turn might generate in us a kind of hospitality and welcoming of a multiplicity of ways of being in the world and spiritual practices that help bend us into the direction of the other so that such direction, such proximity to the world, might help us participate in Spivak’s “non-coercive rearrangement of desire.”

Engel’s essay reminds me again of the urgent need for us to train our imaginations so that our spiritual practices of relinquishing and letting go of the self, the self that is often propped up through relentless accumulation, acquisition, and devouring of others, must continuously be examined for their tendency to foreclose a multiplicity of ways of being in the world, alive to the other and to the self. Such spiritual practice ceaselessly opens our hearts to the necessity of compassion and love, which just might guide us in suturing our separated selves with multiplicity of other selves, and often even of incommensurable selves, such that there is no-self otherwise also experienced as a multiplicity of selves. Ceaselessly and mindfully attending to the self might in the end open that very self toward what Engel is referring to as no-self while continuously “authoring agency” of the intersubjective realm.³

³ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 229–31.

THE CALL, COMMUNITY, AND CLASS: FEMINIST FRUSTRATIONS WITH THE LANGUAGE OF NO-SELF

Julie B. Miller

In this essay, Mary Engel has taken up what I believe to be one of the most difficult tasks in the academic study of religion in her attempt to explain exactly what mystics are talking about when they utilize the language of no-self as they try to describe their experience of oneness or communion with the divine. Further, she questions if feminism and mysticism are compatible. How can it be, she seems to be asking, that in order to be truly, wholly spiritually fulfilled we are to deny our very selves, as mystical rhetoric seems to assert. For if feminism is grounded on the assertion and development of women’s selfhood and spirituality/mysticism is grounded on the denial of that self, the two appear to be incommensurate. Ultimately, she argues that feminists *can* (and should?) utilize this mystical language of no-self in order to fashion a “new vision” that includes both active, public work and individual spirituality and that allows one to experience “no-self in relation to the One.”

My first thoughts when reading this essay centered on Engel’s construction of the goals of feminism and her preoccupation with finding her true calling. In regard to the former, it is certainly true that much feminist thought and theory of the past forty years has focused on the liberation of women from the bondage of a variety of oppressions and the subsequent development of women’s full moral agency and subjectivity. However, this is definitely not the whole story. One key movement that has been made is the theoretical exploration of the subject, of identity, in light of the historical construction of the self.¹ While early stages of this attempt focused on the differences between the “feminine” relational self as opposed to the autonomous, rational “male” self, more recent attempts have moved beyond this binary to the much more complex construction of the “postmodern” self. This move to the postmodern self is one that might alleviate some of Engel’s anxieties, at least theoretically, as it embraces the notion of the nonessential “nature” of the self, or, as she might say, the “no-selfness” of the self. But this is a move that Engel does not make as she seems to hold on tightly to the more typical modern construction of the self in her desire to be an “active, free, responsible, and gloriously individual self” (146). With one core identity and indeed one core “calling” to live out, such a self, perhaps, cannot *but* run up against the rigid boundaries that keep it from experiencing the ecstasy of communion and even union with the divine other.

To be perfectly honest, I empathize with Engel’s depiction of her spiritual

¹ For a sampling of essays on this topic by feminist theologians and religious theorists, such as Serene Jones, Catherine Keller, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, and Paula Cooney, see the essays in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Clapp and Sheila Creeve Davaney (Middletown: Fortress Press, 1997).

dilemma. I personally haven't figured out how a person actually *thinks of herself differently* if she accepts a postmodern concept of the self as opposed to the modern individuated and autonomous concept of the self. On a practical level, at least for me, I still think of myself as "me." As a person with a "core," and yes, maybe even a soul that has had a past and that will persist forward into the future. So while I wonder what Engel would make of postmodern theory and how it might be applicable to her situation, I also recognize that understanding and utilizing such language need not mean that we actually experience ourselves in such a way.

A second question that arose for me while reading Engel's essay concerned her construction of spirituality. I believe many feminists do not make clear distinctions between spirituality and activism as Engel seems to be doing; rather, they find spiritual strength in the work they do for justice as well as in the relationships they create with like-minded people fighting similar battles.² In her call for a "new vision" of spirituality, Engel seems to be maintaining the dualistic construction of spirituality versus activism, which she simultaneously is trying to deconstruct. As she states in her introduction, she is calling for "a broader communal vision that embraces the positive value of public, noisy work *and* of work that is hidden, whether performed by women or men; and a complex vision of individual spirituality that recognizes the life-giving paradox of self active in the world *and* no-self in relation to the One, acknowledging the coexistence of these incommensurates in both women's and men's lives" (159). Here, though, the noisy, public work, while communal, is not deemed spiritual, and the "individual spirituality," while active, is not deemed communal. Thus, while Engel offers us a particular type of spirituality, I am not convinced that it is the only type of spirituality that will be life-giving and empowering for all women, much less for all feminists.

Hence, reading Engel's essay, something in the back of my mind kept nudging me to pull out my old copy of Sharon Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*.³ This is partly because I saw myself—and my frustrations—in much of what Engel was discussing. As a privileged, white, smart, middle-class Catholic girl, I had been repeatedly told as a child that I could be anything I wanted to be; that much was expected of me, since much had been given me; that I could change

² Many feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and international feminist works could be cited here, particularly those that characterize their work as being part of the tradition of liberation theology. As a university professor in a Hispanic-serving institution in which over 60 percent of our students are Hispanic, I immediately think here of Ada María Isasi-Díaz's *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), which the department uses in several courses. The very title of this work suggests that the struggle cannot be won alone and that the community is in fact what we are struggling for. Furthermore, it is the struggle that is key, not the winning of that struggle per se.

³ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

the world, and more important, that I should try. I have tried to live up to these expectations; needless to say, I have pretty much failed, as we all do.

So I have lived much of my life with an underlying feeling of frustration over never being satisfied with my accomplishments; furthermore, this frustration has led to a spiritual restlessness and even despair, similar to that of many middle-aged, middle-class women and men. And as I read Engel's essay, I sensed her fighting a similar battle, a struggle to constantly be and prove her worth through actions and accomplishments. But apparently, she was never quite satisfied in this ego game played out in her lifelong search for her vocation, her one true calling.⁴

Where does Welch's work come in? She is quite clear that such frustration is the plight of the (white) middle class, not of all people everywhere. She argues that "becoming so easily discouraged is the privilege of those accustomed to too much power, accustomed to having needs met without negotiation and work, accustomed to having a political and economic system that responds to their needs."⁵ When we don't feel that we are accomplishing all that we can or should be, we easily become discouraged. Or when we don't feel sufficiently appreciated by our students or partners or bosses or children, we get frustrated. And when we don't think God is helping us find our way, even when we repeatedly ask and ask and ask for her to do so, we get bitter. So what do we do? As Welch notes, we often give in to the "temptation of despair," which ultimately destroys hope and leads to cynicism and resignation to the status quo.⁶

Welch's diagnosis seems quite apt not only for my own condition but for Engel's as well. Engel is quite honest about her spiritual frustration in being unable to find her one true calling. I read her as a woman used to hard-fought and well-deserved success, but someone who has still not found the joy and sense of purpose she believes she is entitled to. Engel asks, "No calling for the poet, the artist? For any individual? Wasn't each of us, in the great democracy of spirit, called to a unique path of serving, as scholar, friend, comedian, *something?*" (144). Having internalized the expectation of success and importance that is the apparent birthright of the privileged classes, Engel's story quite poignantly details the dismay and dissatisfaction that many middle-class women and men feel when they finally realize they are not the center of the universe.

However, Engel does not read her spiritual crisis as a class issue but, rather, she utilizes a developmental discourse to make sense of it, deeming it the result of an "adolescent" spirituality. Thus, while Welch's antidote to middle-class

⁴ My interest was also piqued throughout Engel's essay by her insistence that she have one true calling in life. Why could she not have two or three or four? It seems as if she has already had a few successful careers—professor, mother, minister, writer—why does that not suffice? Perhaps this is another sign of the Western phallogocentric philosophical tradition with which she struggles.

⁵ Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

ennui is to turn outward toward community and to learn from those who have never had the expectation of omnipotence, Engel's approach is to take a quite different path toward spiritual "maturity": deeming her dilemma to be one of personal, individual growth, she maintains this individualistic stance and turns to arguably the most individualistic of all spiritualities, that of mysticism.

While Engel recognizes that historically, many mystics have led active, communal lives, she admits that she has always felt those mystics were the exception. Moreover, she found quite a stumbling block in the ubiquitous references to annihilation and nullification of the self that she found in this literature. I very much related to this portion of her essay, as I, too, have long wrestled with the mystical language of annihilation and nullification, although my aversion to this language is more a reaction to the violence of much mystical rhetoric than to the concept of no-self per se.⁷ Her attempts to describe how she now understands this concept of no-self, as a metaphor, as an "as-if," certainly goes far to address her concern that such a spirituality would necessitate a return to a state of passivity, of harmful self-abnegation, of being controlled by an all-powerful other. Also, the ideas of deheroization and desistance signal quite clearly, I think, the notion that the self is attempting to get out of its own way, to humble its all-pervasive ego that can often get itself stuck.

My only wish here is that Engel had tried to explain not only the *process* by which she came to accept this language but also the mystical *experiences* she had that formed part of this process. It would be very interesting to hear how she made sense of these experiences, of what language or symbol system she engaged in her attempts to describe these experiences. Following Steven Katz, it is an accepted premise in much theorizing about mysticism that mystical experiences are not, in fact, immediate encounters with God but are, rather, "mediated" through the subject's particular religious beliefs and language systems. So I am quite interested in knowing how Engel interpreted and thus experienced these encounters, particularly if they were prior to her acceptance of the language of no-self.⁸

Finally, when reading Engel's desire to find her true vocation and her struggle with the notion of no-self found in much mystical literature, I found myself wanting to offer her a different metaphor, one that seemed particularly apt for her personal struggle. As Amy Hollywood points out, one way of describing

⁷ See Julie B. Miller, "Rapt by God: Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Literature and Law," in *The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture, Religion and Gender*, ed. Richard Valentasis and Janet Carlson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), and Julie B. Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 25–49.

⁸ See, for example, the following works edited by Steven Katz: *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the mystical experience Meister Eckhart, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Marguerite Porete articulated is that of "living without a why." Just as the divine "exists and acts without a why, merely for its own sake," the soul, too, achieves the mystical state of union with the divine through being detached from all desire for efficacious action. Equating one living in this state with the "just" person, Eckhart states, "The just person seeks nothing in works, for those that seek something in their works or those who work because of a 'why' are servants and traders. And so, if you want to be in—or transfigured into justice, then intend nothing in your works and in-figure no 'why' in yourself, neither in time nor in eternity, neither reward nor blessedness, neither this nor that; for these works are all truly dead."⁹

With Engel's concern for finding her vocation, she is insistently seeking her "why." In letting go of that vocation, of giving up "her calling" for the call that is for no one, she is living without a why. As the "self step[s] aside for the work," as Engel calls it (153), she "has risen above 'works,' or external deeds of virtue, and has attained to a pure 'activity' in which true justice lies," as Eckhart describes it.¹⁰ This metaphor of living without a why seems well suited for Engel's particular struggle and is perhaps a model of mystical language that feminists can utilize instead of the more problematic language of annihilation of the self, wounding of the self, and nullification of the self that permeates this literature. While living without a why may also have its limitations and potential dangers, it addresses some of the concerns Engel describes.

All in all, I very much appreciate Engel's willingness to offer us such a personal essay and to let us in on her very private and often painful struggles. In some feminist circles, questions of spirituality, of meaning, or of personal struggles and private pain are either not welcome (at least in print) or are theorized to the point of detachment from our concrete experiences. In my response, I have offered, I hope, some helpful questions and reflections of the theoretical and academic sort, but I have also tried to provide a few personal reflections in the same spirit as Engel in order to continue this conversation without hiding behind the safety of academic rhetoric. I trust that this roundtable discussion will only be the beginning of a very fruitful discussion for the feminist community.

⁹ Amy Hollywood, "Preaching as Social Practice in Meister Eckhart," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 84–85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

ON MYSTICISM, LATINAS/OS, AND THE JOURNEY: A REFLECTION IN
CONVERSATION WITH MARY ENGEL

Nancy Pineda-Madrid

Perhaps for many readers, even most, the question of “no-self” and “the calling” strikes a discordant yet vital cord. Surely, as Susan Ross has argued, “feminist theology’s agent-oriented approach could benefit from greater attention to contemplation.”¹ Mary Engel wisely focuses our gaze here. With our feminist convictions at the ready, she asks, How might we think seriously about women’s spiritual maturation? Even more pointedly, she calls our attention to a defining challenge of the second half of life, one that profoundly vexes our middle-age sensibilities: “Deheroization is the grand failure of a life. Not everyone can fail because it is such hard work, one must first climb painfully up to get to the height to fall from” (151). It is likely that we would rather not ponder Clarice Lispector’s agitational aphorism any sooner than necessary. Fortunately, Engel won’t let us slip away easily.

While Engel’s wise words ought to enjoy wide recognition, they are nonetheless problematic. She writes, “To save your life you must lose it; but one cannot lose what one does not have” (152). Having a life, which one may choose to “lose,” necessarily means that one has had opportunities to develop one’s gifts, talents and abilities, and opportunities to contribute in the world. By way of contrast, she acknowledges the “involuntary, scripted suffering of women, Jews, and all others as the dominant culture’s designated victims,” pointing out that women and men are not called “to be passive victims” and are not called to “resign themselves to an undervalued life” (152). True enough. But while many of the “dominant culture’s designated victims” clearly recognize and ardently embrace the universal spiritual calling to “become fully human,” they do so notwithstanding a dominant culture bent on curing them of the “sin of being.” The quest to cure these recalcitrant “others” of the “sin of being” takes on greater intensity when “being other” concerns not only gender but also race, ethnicity, class, culture, sexual orientation, and the like. This is no minor point. The world is full of “others” who through no failing of their own bear a much more significant burden that daily undermines their efforts to become fully human. The dominant culture by design regularly inflicts wounds upon these “others,” reminding them that they are, to use the title of a once popular play, “children of a lesser god.”² While the calling may be “given to anyone,” and while it is, no doubt, always difficult to “be successful at failure,” for many, it is not only difficult but fraught with intractable complexity.

¹ Susan A. Ross, “Women, Beauty, and Justice: Moving beyond Von Balthasar,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 79–98, quotation on 79.

² Mark Howard Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God: A Play in Two Acts* (Clifton, NJ: J. T. White, 1980).

What I am suggesting here is that while one’s willingness to embrace the “no-self” marks a decisive moment along the journey of spiritual maturation, the path toward this moment needs to be imagined in diverse ways, particularly in light of the many who know a world set on curing them of the “sin of being.” We need many paths to the “no-self.” For paths to spiritual maturity must entail more than “public, noisy work” and more than “work that is hidden” (159). In light of *lo cotidiano* (everyday life and experience³) of the “others,” what might be some different paths to spiritual maturity?

Some new paths may be found if we explore the lives of women mystics with care, attempting to discern how they each negotiated the perilous terrain between their calling to the no-self and the many ways their life journeys were marked by a patriarchal or, better said, *kyriarchal* world determined to cure them of the “sin of being.”⁴ Their life journeys could teach us much about the diversity of paths to spiritual maturity.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) offers us an interesting and informative example. She is known not as a mystic but as a scholarly and literary genius.⁵ However, even though she used her vast intellectual knowledge as the authoritative basis for the theological claims she made, the themes of her scholarly writings reflect her knowledge of mystical experience. She espoused the contemplative life, drawing frequent allusions to mystical union in her writings. For example, in the following poem she imagines St. Jerome, the patron of her religious order, as he seeks union with God.

Following a silent Bugle
on the path that is no path,
to wise up to unwisdom,
seeking an end without end.⁶

No doubt, she knew firsthand the challenge of the “no-self” and “the calling.”

³ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Justice and Love Shall Kiss,” in *La Lucha Continúa: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 186–218; Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 66–73; and María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza clarifies the meaning of *kyriarchy* as distinct from patriarchy. Kyriarchy is “the Greek word for the domination of elite propertied men over women and other men, whereas patriarchy is generally understood in feminist discourses in terms of the Western sex/gender system which posits a man/woman opposition. In contrast, I understand patriarchy as a structure of kyriarchy, as a social and discursive system that interstructures gender, race, class, and colonialist oppressions and has as its focal point women at the bottom of the sociopolitical and religious pyramid” (*Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1984], 211).

⁵ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 49–50, 105–6, 133–34.

⁶ “Siguiendo un mudo Clarín / por camino y sin camino. / por atinar, desatino, / a buscar un fin sin fin.” Quoted in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, prologue by Francisco Monterde, 9th ed. (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1996), 133.

On the whole, the highly cogent character of Sor Juana's writings reveals her inclination toward the philosophical approach taken by John of the Cross rather than the more visionary, eccentric approach of Teresa of Avila. Inasmuch as Sor Juana's approach reflects her insatiable intellect, it also reflects her drive to have a life, to develop her God given abilities, and to become fully human. She shunned, at great personal cost, the traditional path of marriage and family. Initially, she joined a Carmelite convent, which she soon left for the religious order of St. Jerome (the Hieronymites). In both, she sought time for reflection and intellectual pursuits. The writings of this Mexican intellectual genius reveal an amazing command of the most important works in the fields of literature, science, philosophy, and theology, among others. Even though male scholars of her day could not help but acknowledge her brilliant, creative mind, eventually church authorities judged Sor Juana's brilliance repugnant for a woman. She resisted, claiming in her famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* that to suppress her intellectual work would be to defy God, who had given her intelligence for a purpose.⁷ She knew intimately the continual blows inflicted by a culture determined to cure her of the "sin of being." A close study of her life journey with an eye toward her spiritual maturation would undoubtedly prove fruitful.

Still, additional paths to spiritual maturity can be found in the faith experience of Latinas/os. When Engel writes that each woman and man is called "to freely choose to live fully as a self humbled by nothingness, a self that no longer takes *itself* as reality but becomes part of the marvel orchard of the universe" (152), she begs the question, How does one learn the practice or discipline both to live fully *and* to not regard one's self as reality? How does the self come to see itself as inhabiting "the prison of I-hood" (147), and then take steps to emerge from this prison? Arguably, the faith experience of Latinas/os finds its distinctiveness in its "popular religious practices," and I believe, one form of these practices offers a response to the questions Engel poses.

I need to clarify what I mean by "popular religious practices." The term *popular* does not refer to common, widespread, in vogue, and the like. "Popular" means that the "symbols, practices, and narratives are *of the people*."⁸ "Popular religion is 'popular' . . . because its creators and practitioners are the people, and more concretely, the marginalized people in society (i.e., those social sectors pushed against their will to the 'dispensable' or 'disposable' margins of society)."⁹ For the most part, lay people created and promoted these practices over the course of centuries; members of the church clergy or hierarchy did not encourage them.

⁷ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Salisbury, CT: Lime Rock Press, 1982).

⁸ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 21.

⁹ Orlando O. Espín, "Popular Religion as an Epistemology (of Suffering)," in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 162.

Lay people wanted to keep their faith vibrant and alive in the face of exclusion and disregard by church officials, most certainly by U.S. Roman Catholic Church leadership.¹⁰ Consequently, these practices, which took the form of theodramas, rituals, symbols, and so on, held energy and impetus for lay people, as they still do.

Participation in theodramas encouraged one to emerge from "the prison of I-hood." But before examining the dynamic of theodramas, allow me briefly to identify some of them. In Latin America and in the United States, generations of Latinas/os learned the central mysteries of the Christian faith, in part, through participation in theodramas. In December, Latino/Hispanic communities dramatize the *posadas* (Mary and Joseph's journey in search of shelter just before Jesus's birth). Even though only a few played the key roles, the entire community participates in the roles of either the various innkeepers from whom Mary and Joseph requested lodging or as the pilgrims who traveled with Mary and Joseph in search of lodging. Everyone plays some role and is encouraged to imagine how the person whose role they were playing might have felt. During this same time of year, communities gather to reenact the *pastorela* (a shepherds' drama that portrays the struggle between good and evil amid the birth of Jesus). Again, everyone participating and not playing a key role is asked to take on the role of a shepherd faced with how to receive, or not, the birth of the Christ child. During the Advent season, La Virgen de Guadalupe is reenacted in a similar fashion (Mary's apparition to Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531). In spring during holy week, the *via crucis* is reenacted as a drama of Jesus's trial and crucifixion. It is likewise known as *la via dolorosa* or *la pasion de Jesucristo*. All who are not playing the many key roles in this drama play the part of a member of the crowd yelling at Pilate, shouting out that Jesus be crucified, or released.¹¹

Theodramas create and nurture a dynamic that invites all participants to experience that their own uniqueness is "nothing in itself," that it "exists in relation to God." This dynamic comes about, first, because all participants play a part in the drama; there are no bystanders or spectators or audience members. Each participant is asked to invest themselves, cognitively, emotionally, physically, imaginatively, and even kinesthetically. Participants become sensitized to time and space in a fashion different from their ordinary awareness. Accordingly,

¹⁰ Timothy Matovina and Gerald E. Poyo, eds., *¡Presente! U.S. Latino Catholics from Colonial Origins to the Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); and Moises Sandoval, *On the Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

¹¹ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*, and Roberto S. Goizueta, "U.S. Hispanic Popular Catholicism as Theopoetics," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Busal Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 261–88; Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 32–46; Ana María Piñeda, "Hospitality," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 29–42; and Timothy Matovina and Gary Riche-Estrella, SVD, eds., *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

whatever part a participant plays makes demands of that person, invites them to open themselves to the role and insights it might offer them. Roberto Goizueta describes this well in his account of the experience of a man who played the part of a Roman soldier during a reenactment of the *via crucis*. He writes:

The crucifixion of Jesus became present to the "Roman soldier" nailing him to the cross at San Fernando¹² only because, in the physical action of hammering the nails, this poor Mexican man embodied, made concrete and particular, what had earlier been merely an abstract universal concept, "a Roman soldier." The Roman soldier was, for this man, no longer an abstraction. The Mexican parishioner was no longer just *playing* the part of the soldier; he now *was* the soldier. As the soldier, he was no longer merely pretending to crucify Jesus; he *was* crucifying Jesus. Thus, he could also now proclaim "Truly, this was God's son," no longer as the declaration of an unnamed Roman soldier but as *his own* profoundly felt belief. By physically putting himself in the place of the soldier, he recognized his own intrinsic relationship to the soldier, to the multitudes surrounding the cross, to Mary, and to Jesus Christ. His own identity was revealed in those relationships, which in turn presupposed the embodiment, or incarnation of the faceless, abstract "Roman soldier" of the biblical text in the concrete, particular, historical person of *this* Mexican man—and, thus, presupposed the incarnation of the faceless, spiritual "Christ of faith" in *that* other Mexican man who now *was* Jesus Christ.¹³

The point here is that theodramas can be a kind of radical schooling in which participants learn to let go, to enter into the sacred space of the drama, a space in which one dares "to stop *insisting* on one's self" and is capable of losing "the self in surrender to the unknown" (153). One has the opportunity to learn of "the need to displace one's self as the center of value" and to know one's self as "humbled *in relation to* the One," as Engel advocates (150). These dramas offer a radical schooling in that they demand one's full attention; they orient, in the words of Simone Weil, "all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."¹⁴

Much as theodramas afford rich opportunities, a word of caution is in order. As María Pilar Aquino has observed, popular religious practices remain an ambiguous arena for women. Too often, practices bear the stain of the patriarchal worldviews out of which they emerge.¹⁵ And problematically, not much work has been done on popular religious practices from the perspective of women, much less a feminist perspective.¹⁶ So while theological dramas offer an answer

¹² The Roman Catholic Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, where the reenactment took place.

¹³ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*, 69–70.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," trans. Emma Gruafurd, in *Waiting for God* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 105.

¹⁵ Aquino, *Our Cry for Life*, 179.

¹⁶ Among Latina theologians there are a few recent exceptions. See Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture, and Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Flor-

to the quest to live fully yet not regard ourselves as reality, they also present us with complex slippery slopes. They need to be examined not simply appreciatively but also critically with attention to the ways in which they are used to further male domination and female subordination. Even so, there is power in these dramas that can be used to subvert and that too must be taken seriously.

BEYOND THE CONFINES OF DUALITY: INSIGHTS FROM THE SPIRITUAL QUEST OF A TENDAI BUDDHIST WOMAN PRIEST

Masako Kuroki

Mary Engel has presented us with a challenge regarding mysticism, and I would like to approach it as a feminist scholar of religion who has studied at an American seminary and now teaches sociology of gender at a Japanese university. The reason I am taking part in this roundtable is that my research interests include the spiritual quest of a woman priest of the Tendai School, which is one of the schools of traditional Japanese Buddhism.¹ Women today who engage in spiritual quests do not all do so for the same reasons or by the same methods. What they do have in common, however, is the element of women's struggle in search of wholeness through integration of the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, spiritual and social, and so on. In many cases, married women's quests are understood to require an either/or choice between family and religion. One female Tendai priest rejected this either/or choice, however, and instead found her "station-in-life" in Buddhism. I take her spiritual quest as the basis of my response to Engel's challenge regarding dualistic, divisive constructions of selfhood, calling, and mysticism, as well as my response to Engel's quest for wholeness.

Just as a definition of mysticism is difficult to reach, spirituality also has multiple meanings and is difficult to define. Ursula King writes, "From a histor-

ida, 2006), 102–20; Anita de Luna, "Popular Religion and Spirituality," in *Handbook of Latino Theologies*, ed. Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La Torre (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 105–13; and Jeanette Rodriguez, "Latina Popular Catholicism," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, Vol. 1, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 168–78.

I gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments I received from feminist historian of religion Noriko Kawahashi in the course of preparing this response, and Richard Peterson's assistance with translation.

¹ Masako Kuroki, "Seeking a Station-in-Life: The Spiritual Quest of a Female Tendai Buddhist Priest," in *Memory and Imagination: Essays and Other Musings on Buddhist Thought and Culture* (Kyoto: Nagata Eishodo, forthcoming). I use *female priest* in this essay to correspond to *senryo*, *jishoku*, and other designations that refer to clerical rank in Japanese. Although *female priest* and *nun* are usually used interchangeably, the latter has been critiqued sometimes as discriminatory.

cal, anthropological, and comparative point of view, spirituality always exists in the plural, as spiritualities." She finds that "these different spiritualities can be seen as different cultural forms."² Here, I understand spirituality to be a connectedness with something greater than oneself. That greater something may for one person be a deity, while for another, it may be Buddha, nature, or truth. Although people seek it through their respective methods, spirituality provides these seekers with a foundation for existence that transcends the framework of an organized religion (tradition), and provides meaning and orientation for living their lives. The spiritual quest of female Tendai priest Yokoyama Hōyū was also a path she took to discover her "connectedness with something greater." By this process Yokoyama found her "station-in-life," which for her constituted truth.

Unlike Engel, Yokoyama did not deny any of her three identities as wife, mother, and Japanese language teacher, although she did experience conflict between them as she pushed onward along the path to wholeness through rigorous spiritual discipline. As this indicates, Yokoyama Hōyū possessed a number of different identities. She was a wife who married in her twenties, and the mother of two children. She has also been a Japanese language teacher at the local YWCA for more than twenty-five years. As a wife, mother, and Japanese language teacher, she says, "There was something within me that could not be satisfied with just that, and that never let me stop seeking" from very early in her life.³ She was seeking the nature of truth, and where she must go to find it. Ever since her childhood, she had been wondering why people were not equal, and thinking vaguely about why people exist. Apparently, her questioning did not cease even when she became an adult, married, and gave birth to her children.

Yokoyama was always seeking, and her spiritual quest began in her mid-twenties when she encountered the Bible. She then drifted from religion to religion until she reached her turning point, which was her encounter with the Tendai practice of mountain circumambulation (*kaihō-gyō*). At that point, she said, she had no knowledge of Buddhism, but she happened upon a newspaper travel section with an invitation to a one-day mountain circumambulation practice. Yokoyama decided to participate because, she said, she had previously seen newspaper articles about an *ajari* who accomplished the thousand-day mountain circumambulation practice.⁴ When she read those articles, tears welled from her eyes and would not stop. Obviously, she had come upon something that had deep significance for her.

² Ursula King, "Is There a Future for Religious Studies as We Know It? Some Postmodern, Feminist, and Spiritual Challenges," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 2 (2002): 365–88, quotation on 379.

³ Kuroki, "Seeking a Station-in-Life."

⁴ The thousand-day mountain circumambulation practice (*sennichi kaihō-gyō*) takes place on Mt. Hiei, where the practitioner makes a circuit of the surrounding mountains every day for one thousand days over a seven-year period. Needless to say, this practice is not open to women.

Yokoyama therefore took part in the one-day mountain circumambulation. With a group of lay participants, she spent an entire night walking a thirty-kilometer stretch of mountain. After it was over, she thought to herself that she would never repeat this ordeal again. She knew, though, that there were people who had done not just a single day but a thousand-day mountain circumambulation practice, and she couldn't stop thinking about it. As she saw it, "This was putting the practitioner's life on the line for something that could not be achieved with money or reputation. Maybe this would help me find what I'd been looking for."⁵ This was the beginning of her regular visits to Mt. Hiei, the mountaintop center of Tendai Buddhism, where two years later she formally renounced the secular life and entered on a rigorous program of spiritual practice.

Yokoyama Hōyū completed a series of priestly disciplines at age forty-eight, and in 2001, she became one of 103 female chief priests (*josei jūshoku*) out of nearly 7,400 who hold this rank in the Tendai priesthood.⁶ She undertook the demanding discipline required of those aspiring to become Tendai priests. Needless to say, her goal in undertaking this discipline was not to become a priest, but rather to pursue her spiritual quest.

According to Paula Arai, the profile of the typical aspirant who enters an abbey of the Soto School has changed over the past forty years. Nuns used to enter at age sixteen, but now the average novice's age is forty-three, and many of them now come from ordinary lay families. Arai explains that most novices used to enter in their teens because it was their parents' wish, but novices today choose this path as a conscious, mature decision of their own.⁷ This was also the case with Yokoyama's spiritual quest.

At first Yokoyama's family could not understand her spiritual quest, and so they did not take it seriously, but eventually, they supported her. In 2002, her parents gave over a part of their garden to her, and she built a small temple there called Mushō Kongō-in. She was the resident female priest, shaved head and all, but she was also a Japanese language teacher. At the same time, she lived in the midst of secular society, and shopped for meat and fish in the supermarket to cook and eat. There was nothing two-faced or duplicitous about her situation. Yokoyama explains that she was acting as herself in every part of this, and it would have seemed strange to her to try to differentiate one part of her life from another. As she sees it, wholeness is not a matter of intellectual

⁵ Kuroki, "Seeking a Station-in-Life."

⁶ Tendai is a school of esoteric Buddhism that was founded in the early ninth century on Mt. Hiei, which is located northeast of the city of Kyoto. According to the Public Office of the Tendai shu General Administration Department, there were 7,379 priests as of April 2002. Of that number, 1,555 (21.07 percent) were female priests, and 103 of those were female chief priests.

⁷ Paula K. R. Arai, "Soto Zen Nuns in Modern Japan: Keeping and Creating Tradition," in *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected Readings*, ed. Mark R. Mullins et al. (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993), 203–18.

understanding so much as it is an experience of everyday life. She finds it not only in religious activity, therefore, but everywhere she goes in her community and outside her temple, where she is constantly and actively expanding her encounters with others. During the New Year season, for example, Yokoyama joins with Roman Catholic priests in offering prayers for homeless laborers who have died of exposure and illness in public parks. These memorial gatherings are held where the homeless gather at soup kitchens or for counseling of various kinds, and Yokoyama also reaches out actively to these people with greetings and words of encouragement.

From her mid-twenties into her fifties, Yokoyama had three formative spiritual encounters: with the Bible, the *Heart Sutra*, and the Tendai mountain circumambulation practice. Over the past thirty years, she has felt that her encounters with Christianity, Shinto, and Tendai Buddhism were like "guiding hands" leading her along the path of her quest. At the end of her quest, she found her own station-in-life in Buddhism. As Yokoyama sees it, however, every one of those three guiding hands was necessary and essential. They were all significant encounters, and for her, they were not mutually exclusive. Consequently, she herself was not a convert to any one of them.

Just as historical eras are different, so are women's spiritual quests. The vocabulary to discuss women's quests did not exist around the beginning of the 1970s.⁸ Fortunately, however, that vocabulary is available to us today. Published works on spiritual exploration by women in the context of modern Japanese Buddhism include the autobiography of Satomi Myōdō (1896–1978).⁹ Although Yokoyama and Satomi belong to different historical periods, both women's spiritual quests can be read for their deeply felt search for truth, the strength of will to carry through with that search, and the influences they received from a plurality of religions. The culture of Satomi Myōdō's era instilled the aspiration, predominant in her time, to be a "good wife and wise mother," but she rejected this traditional aspiration, and instead set forth on her journey to spiritual realization. Yokoyama Hōyū, by contrast, has accepted the painful conflicts between the expectations of women's role in the family and the spiritual quest, and she has consistently rejected approaches that insist on an either/or choice between family and religion.

Carol P. Christ observes that "nothingness often has a different quality" for men and women in the literatures of both East and West. Male mystics' quests start with the experience of nothingness that comes upon realizing that

⁸ Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), xxix.

⁹ Sallie B. King, *Passionate Journey: The Spiritual Autobiography of Satomi Myodo*, trans. and annotated by Sallie B. King (Boston: Shambhala, 1987). See also Sallie B. King, "Egalitarian Philosophies in Sexist Institutions: The Life of Satomi-san, Shinto Miko, and Zen Buddhist Nun," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (1988): 7–26.

the power and respect they achieved in society were illusory. This is in contrast to the situation of ordinary women: "Women never have what male mystics must strive to give up. . . . [and therefore,] women may need only to strip away the ideology of patriarchy that tells them they are fulfilled as wives and mothers in order to come face to face with the nothingness they know as lack of self, lack of power, and lack of value for women in a male-centered world."¹⁰ Some recent male spiritual practitioners, however, do not necessarily give up what they have but embark instead on a mystic's quest much in the way that women do, seeking what they do not have. It seems likely that the written accounts of male mystics describe something that is quite different from the experiences of ordinary men whose mystic quests are not expressed in language.

There is also the question of how socialized dichotomies differ among religions and religious sects. It appears certain at least that, compared to Yokoyama, Engel has proceeded more painstakingly along the course of unlearning those dichotomies. A Japanese female priest in her forties, who converted from Roman Catholicism to Zen Buddhism, made a remark to me that may be illuminating in this connection. Roman Catholic socialization involves strict instruction in the duality of good and evil, while Zen Buddhism teaches that the two are in an undifferentiated state from which they cannot be distinctly separated. The priest said that she came to perceive this latter state as reality. What she describes is the insight that life comprises pure and impure, good and evil together.

In any event, although female Tendai priest Yokoyama and Engel may differ in how they approach their lifelong quest, they share certain insights regarding the challenge and questioning of wholeness. That is, the self-identity of no-self or nullification of self that Engel found at the end of her struggle does not simply point to the series of characteristics allotted to women under conventional dualistic logic. Instead, therefore, we can understand it as a work in progress that is creating an as-yet-unseen self, a self that cannot be achieved just by negating those characteristics. This understanding is consonant with Yokoyama's remark that "spiritual discipline goes on until we die."¹¹

¹⁰ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, 18.

¹¹ Kuroki, "Seeking a Station-in-Life."