

The distinctive relationship between sexual ecstasy and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered clergy of the Church of England: Integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

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Abstract:

Twenty-two participants who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered clergy of the Church of England were recruited and interviewed using a semi-structured interview. The methodology employed incorporated Transpersonal Awareness with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. After several levels of analysis the following superordinate themes emerged: (a) twenty of these participants organised their sexuality and spirituality in a dialectical or unified relationship; (b) twelve of these reported a direct mystical union with God through the veil of sexual ecstasy; (c) all twelve reported that these experiences have been transformative leading to an expanded and inclusive sense of self and other, which has also enhanced their ministry; (d) rituals and symbols that reflect the distinctive relationship between sex and spirit are needed to reflect and confirm heterosexual and LGBT participants' lived experiences; and, (e) the House of Bishops of the Church of England continues to place spirituality and sexuality in a dualistic relationship, relegating the latter into the shadows of human experience, causing a deep sense of rejection and oppression for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered clergy who faithfully serve as priests within the Church of England.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

My research is concerned with exploring the personal, psychological and theological meanings attributed to sexuality and spirituality for heterosexual and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) clergy of the Church of England (C of E). In particular, I hope to ascertain whether a distinctive relationship exists between these two domains of embodied experience and existence. If this is so, I wish to discern how moments of sexual and spiritual ecstasy contribute to each participant's psychological growth and spiritual development. In psychological terms: how do the archetypal energies of Eros (sexual libido or impulse) and the Self (religious libido or impulse) interact, inform and nurture each participant's sex and faith journey (Jung, 1911-12/1952; TePaske, 2008). I return to this salient point shortly in the proceeding subsection.

In this Introductory Chapter, therefore, it will be necessary to begin by exploring as to what indeed constitutes sexual and spiritual ecstasy; and define the labels heterosexual and LGBT in order to set the terms of reference for our discussion. It will then be important to provide a brief historical overview to chart the C of E's ongoing struggle to find a meaningful rapprochement between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. This has ultimately led to a bitter division on the subject and a seemingly unsurmountable impasse. Once this has been established it will be expedient for me to locate myself within this research topic by reflecting upon my own personal interest and professional investment in this focus of enquiry. In this way I hope to justify why I may be best placed to conduct this research and also reflexively signpost my own proclivities on this issue in order to monitor and minimize, as far as is humanly

possible, my own personal and professional biases. The challenge, as I see it, is how to reflexively use my previous experiences and professional interests to faithfully decipher and interpret my participants' mystical encounters through sexual ecstasy. Next, I will provide a brief overview of existing research outcomes that have specifically focused upon C of E clergy to date. I will then review several research projects that have explored the mystical nature of sexual ecstasy. These studies have significantly contributed to my rationale for this current study, including other personal and professional factors which I will highlight from time to time as this chapter gradually unfolds. Finally, I will outline the proposed structure of this thesis after briefly concluding at the end of this chapter.

1.1 Towards a Working Definition: Ecstasy and Sexual Identity

The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the term ecstasy is derived from the Greek word “*ekstasis*” which means “to stand outside of oneself” or “a sense of being taken outside of oneself”. While ecstasy clearly relates to a state of happiness or joyful excitement, it was originally connected to a spiritual state that was induced through mystical self-transcendence. In more recent times ecstasy has been referred to as a phenomenological state that can be stimulated through the application of amphetamines or psychotropic-based recreational drugs. Interestingly, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* the term ecstasy is defined and endowed with both its human and sacred properties:

[T]he raptures of sexual intercourse [that] enables the lovers to penetrate the mystery of love itself. Such union is the climax of contemplation more than a physical or mental activity and provides an analogy of the type of mystical experiences. (1983, p.172)

Here, the rapturous feelings associated with human sexual intercourse are used as a potent analogy or motif to describe the spiritual euphoria of being united with God. In the 13th-century, for example, such a spiritual state of heightened ecstasy became known as the *Unio Mystica* to denote the all-consuming, ecstatic mystical union or 'sacred marriage' between the religious worshipper and God.

It is interesting to note that on this point Jung's (1911-12/1952) definition of libido, which is ultimately about desire, is all-encompassing and unlike Freud's, not solely limited to sexual desire. Hence, Jung states that, "[L]ibido is the energy which is able to communicate itself to any field of activity whatsoever, be it power, hunger, hatred, sexuality or religion" (ibid, para. 197). Jung later noted that while sexual and spiritual ecstasy might be regarded as adversaries, in actuality they operate as a set of opposites, underpinning psychological growth and spiritual development:

For anyone acquainted with religious phenomenology it is an open secret that although physical and spiritual passions are deadly enemies, they are nevertheless brothers-in-arms, for which reason it often needs the merest touch to convert one into the other. Both are real, and together they perform a set of opposites, which is one of the most fruitful sources of psychic energy. (1948/1960, para. 414)

Elsewhere he argues that sexual libido can have a spiritual limitation exercised upon it, thereby transforming it for a 'higher' spiritual purpose. "Under natural conditions a spiritual limitation is set upon the unlimited drive of the instinct to fulfil itself, which differentiates it and makes it available for different applications" (Jung, 1955-6/1963, para. 602). The medieval Christian mystics come to mind at this point and, of course, LGBT clergy who currently serve the C of E who are being instructed by the House of Bishops' to conduct themselves likewise.

I am inclined, however, to agree with Agosin (1992) who offers an alternative way of comprehending our sexual and spiritual libidos. He maintains that the sexual and spiritual impulses are a desire to return to God. As a result, the sexual impulse does not necessarily have to be sublimated or redirected towards the religious impulse. Unless of course, an individual is consciously conflicted on the matter or unconsciously possessed with inner psychic conflict between their sexual and religious impulses, unable to reconcile these two aspects of their being. Equally, an individual may comfortably wish to adhere to this spiritual limitation on their sexual libido out of conscious *choice*. This would be in line with many religious traditions. But the operative word here, and significantly for our discussion, is *choice*. Agosin holds sexual and spiritual desire in a healthy, dialectical relationship, noting that as human beings:

We long for the union with the sexual other so that we may become whole, the same way that we long for divine union to find meaning and purpose in our lives. In a similar light, we can see that in orgasm we are swept away in the same way that the ego is taken over by the Self in mystical union. (1992, p.46)

The implication of this is that terms like libido, impulse, desire or ecstasy straddle both the sexual and spiritual realms of human experience. Elfers reminds us that in phenomenological and qualitative terms, ecstasy:

[S]uggests an intensification of emotion that produces trance-like dissociation from all but a narrow range of feelings and perceptions. While the overpowering emotion related to ecstasy is most closely related to feelings of bliss, exaltation, or delight, the original use of the word could have included feelings of terror, rage or grief. (2009, pp. 8-9)

To my mind, what Elfers is touching upon here is the numinous quality of ecstasy, as articulated by Rudolf Otto. Otto (1958) describes the numinous or sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* to signify its dual nature: on the one hand, the bliss of divine

light and on the other, the terror of the dark side of God. Hence holiness, or the numinous, can be encountered within the human realm of experience “like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood [or in] its wild and demonic forms (...) as almost grisly horror and shuddering” (pp.12-13). While Jung incorporates Otto’s idea of the holy into his depth psychological approach, particularly its “potent, compelling and ambiguous nature” (Main, 2006, p.159), he also makes some minor adjustments. Significantly, for our purposes, Jung links the numinous to the human psyche in order to “connect it more closely to the human and empirical” (ibid, p.159). And it is to this human and empirical investigation about the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy that this thesis is dedicated - particularly as this relates to heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E.

As I turn to the labels of heterosexual and LGBT, the first qualification that is important to make is that these terms are tropes or approximations. In the best sense of the word, tropes are figurative terms of expression and should not be considered as concrete categories into which people narrowly comply. Likewise, Cornwall (2013) draws our attention to holding a more flexible and nuanced approach when considering sexuality. She rightly highlights that sexuality in its narrowest sense denotes the sexual desire that we may feel for another person, be that the opposite sex (heterosexual), same-sex (lesbian and gay) or both sexes (bisexual). In its broadest sense, sexuality includes our personhood and the relational energy with which we express ourselves in terms of how we relate and respond to others and the wider world. To this I would also add that the expression of sexuality is, to some degree, contextually mediated and valorised or forbidden and condemned. So, for example, in an all-male exclusive environment some men may engage in same-sex genital acts for sexual pleasure, but

this may not be an indication of their same-sex or homoerotic desire. Indeed, they may unmistakably identify as heterosexual. On this note the sexologists Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin (1948) were, for their time, proposing a radical way of conceptualizing sexuality in flexible and complex ways, casting this human form of expression on a continuum, ranging from homosexuality, bisexuality to heterosexuality. After extensive research they concluded that over a third of their male participants had engaged in same-sex relations well after the age of puberty. In short, sexuality is not some rigidly defined commodity but rather a fluid and flexible one in its manifestation and expression.

Equally, gender should not be apprehended or assumed to occupy distinct classifications in terms of male or female. While the biological functions of menstruation and ejaculation have some essential bearing on how women and men organise their sense of gender, for many people their gender is far more than their biological sex. Hence, there are many ways in which men and women occupy and express their gender that is also constructed (Cornwall, 2013): influenced by familial, social, political, cultural and religious contextual factors. I am reminded here of Beardsley's (2016) insightful understanding of gender as performance: how in particular, binaries about the gender model of male/female have been used by Western Christianity to legitimise the domination, exclusion and exploitation of women. In this sense: "Transgender people highlight the limitations of that model, and the theological and counter-cultural importance of Christianity's focus on being human, rather than male or female" (2016, pp.31-32).

In this subsection, I have attempted to arrive at a working definition as to what constitutes sexual and spiritual ecstasy. I have also argued for a fluid and flexible understanding of sexuality and gender that terms like male and female, and heterosexual and LGBT can all too easily obscure. So, to reiterate, these terms are a shorthand way of discussing sexuality and gender. Having now defined and clarified the terminology to be used in this thesis, I now turn to a brief history of the C of E's continuing struggle to reconcile sexuality and spirituality; which has in part informed my rationale for undertaking my research project.

1.2 The Church of England: Sexuality and Spirituality

In this subsection I briefly highlight and reflect upon the key milestones, debates and stalemates that have emerged on the issue of sexuality and spirituality for the C of E over several decades. The Church has prayed, discussed and consulted its members about the unique relationship between sexuality and spirituality. In effect the Church has endeavoured to discern what private and public expression this relationship should take for faithful heterosexual and LGBT Christian members of its congregations. Specifically, for our purposes, how individual, non-heterosexual clergy should conduct their sex and faith lives in public office as a Clerk in Holy Orders: Priest.

I will take as my starting point the events that took place in the 1950's that heralded the C of E's genuine and compassionate concern for vulnerable homosexual men, and end with a brief overview of the current impasse that continues to exist on the issue of sexuality and spirituality for LGBT clergy. The purpose of presenting this brief history about the C of E's ongoing struggle to reconcile the relationship between sexuality and

spirituality for LGBT clergy is twofold. Firstly, such a review, albeit brief, is essential to contextualise the backdrop out of which my own research interest has organically fermented and gradually emerged. This feels pertinent given that I am a C of E Clerk in Holy Orders (Priest) who identifies as a bisexual man. Secondly, by reflecting upon the current impasse I aim to show a key component of my rationale for undertaking this transpersonal research. Namely, that if it transpires that heterosexual and LGBT clergy have mystical experiences of God through the veil of sexual ecstasy, could this provide a way forward on the current impasse that exists today? In other words, if heterosexual and non-heterosexual clergy experience their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a unifying relationship that both enhances their psychological growth and spiritual development, then this could be a potential pathway to joining these two primary, embodied ways of being and relating in the world. I now turn to the events of the 1950's to begin to trace the significant milestones in the C of E's history regarding its fluctuating and problematic relationship with sexual and spiritual ecstasy as this appertains to its Christian laity and clergy.

In 1954 the C of E's Moral Welfare Council campaigned for male homosexuality to be decriminalised. As a result, the Wolfenden Committee was influenced by the Church's stance and came to the same conclusion, with the Sexual Offences Act later becoming an Act of Parliament in 1967. This pivotal change in the law, setting the legal age to 21, allowed consenting male adults to engage in genital sexual acts in private. This shift in public opinion was spearheaded by the C of E's concern for social justice and pastoral care for homosexual men. The Church wished to protect their safety and well-being amidst numerous accounts of prejudice and persecution, and blackmail and exploitation. This was not surprising given the familial, societal and institutionalised

guilt and shame attributed to their sexual preferences, forcing them to be covert in their sexual expression.

In stark contrast, the C of E's General Synod of 1987 took a very different stance on the issue of same-sex genital acts between consenting adult men. Biblical texts and traditional Church teaching were called upon to reiterate that God's ideal for the expression of human sexuality was within heterosexual marriage; and, most importantly, that sexual acts between men fell short of this ideal requiring repentance. In 1991 the House of Bishops issued the following statement in *Issues in Human Sexuality*:

The convergence of scripture, Tradition and reasoned reflection on experience, even including the newly sympathetic and perceptive thinking of our own day, makes it impossible for the Church to come with integrity to any other conclusion. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry. (pp.19-20)

In 2003 the House of Bishops' requested a study guide to invite discussion and debate and prayerful reflection across the parishes of the C of E with regard to homosexuality. However, the House of Bishops was clear in this document that its original statement of 1991 remained unchanged. Before the publication of this study guide the Revd. Dr. Jeffrey John had been appointed as the next Bishop of Reading. Jeffrey John was in a long term, celibate gay relationship. If a gay man or lesbian woman disclosed that they were in a same-sex relationship then this needed to be celibate in nature in order to undertake Holy Orders as Bishop, Priest or Deacon.

While all evidence suggested that Jeffrey John's relationship was indeed celibate, many conservative and Evangelical Christians nevertheless wanted him to repent for his hitherto homosexual activity at a public service of confession before he could be consecrated as Bishop of Reading. They also demanded that he give his unequivocal assurance that he would refrain from actively campaigning on gay rights. With intense media speculation about his appointment intensifying and controversy about the issue escalating to a vociferous level, Jeffrey John's consecration as Bishop of Reading never materialised. At the same time as the publication of the House of Bishops' study guide, Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest in a consummated same-sex relationship was consecrated as Bishop of New Hampshire by the US Episcopal Church in 2003.

This perennial issue of welcoming and celebrating non-heterosexual Christians, and in particular clergy who identified as such, and who are sexually active, has not only heralded a crisis within the C of E and the wider Anglican Communion, but also been a cause of bitter division. The Rt. Revd. Alan Wilson recounts that upon sharing his convictions via his blog about the need of the C of E to accept and celebrate gay marriage, he was contacted by some heterosexual respondents who informed him "in the name of God, that gay people are lice and vermin who should be aborted before birth [while] bleating about how much God loves gay people really" (Wilson, 2014, p.xvii). Reflecting upon these statements, he was disturbed by how "bizarre homophobic rage always seemed to have a religious rationale" (ibid, p.xvii).

Recent developments on the issues of sexuality and spirituality involved an *Open Letter to the Archbishops*, organised by Jayne Ozanne. As a member of the C of E's

General Synod and former director of 'Accepting Evangelicals', a group who campaign for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians, she spearheaded the letter that was published on the 7th January 2016. A 105 Senior Anglicans urged the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt. Hon. and Most Revd. Justin Welby, and the Archbishop of York, the Rt. Hon. and Most Revd. Dr John Sentamu, to acknowledge that the Church has "not loved LGBTI members (...) as brothers and sisters in Christ to be embraced and celebrated [making them feel like] second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God, often abandoned and alone" and as such that the worldwide Anglican Communion needed to repent "for accepting and promoting discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, and for the pain and rejection that this has caused" (<https://www.theguardian.com>).

The letter was published ahead of the week-long summit which had been organised by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. He invited 38 Primates from the Anglican Communion to discuss the ongoing threats of schism between the liberal North American and conservative African Dioceses regarding the unilateral decision of the US Episcopal Church permitting same-sex marriage. Justin Welby issued the following statement at the end of the Primates' week-long summit:

I want to take this opportunity personally to say how sorry I am for the hurt and pain, in the past and present, that the church has caused and the love that we at times completely failed to show, and still do, in many parts of the world including this country. (<https://www.theguardian.com>)

As a result of the primates' meeting the US Episcopal Church was barred for three years from voting on issues relating to Christian doctrine or strategy, until 2019, for antagonising conservative bishops by consecrating the openly gay Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

While the Archbishop's statement was undoubtedly a generous act of apology, it was not a public proclamation of contrition on behalf of the C of E and the wider Anglican Communion for the exclusion, hurt and oppression that LGBT Christians have experienced at the hands of the hierarchy. Likewise, the punitive sanctions against the US Episcopal Church for ordaining Gene Robinson did not bode well with regard to the C of E's alleged openness about its listening process on matters of human sexuality and its relationship to Christian faith.

Fifty-years have passed since the decriminalisation of homosexuality when the C of E played an active role in securing social justice and protection for homosexual men. Since that time the battle lines have been drawn and redrawn, particularly as this relates to LGBT clergy who faithfully continue to serve the Church. Without question the C of E has been gripped by theological, moral and ecclesiastical turmoil as it struggles to reconcile the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Furthermore, attempts at bridging the gap between warring factions have seemed futile, with one side of the debate perceiving the integration and celebration of LGBT clergy, who are sexually active, as a sign of cultural decadence and scriptural disobedience. While on the other side, claims that to not do so is tantamount to institutionalised and religious oppression and a deepening inability of the Church to 'speak' with any relevance to the current age (Coakley, 2013).

Given this apparently intractable deadlock for the C of E on the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, I was initially spurred on to finding a way to engage heterosexual and LGBT clergy to reflect upon these embodied ways of being and

relating. If heterosexual and non-heterosexual clergy were willing to anonymously share their subjective experiences of their sexual and spiritual impulses within clear professional and ethical research boundaries, could a greater understanding be achieved as to how these aspects enhanced their faith and sex lives? This naturally led me to be more curious about Christianity's historical attitude towards sexual and spiritual ecstasy. I also wondered about the Christian mystics, in particular, on this front. I was also interested about psychology's offerings on my topic of enquiry: how did psychology conceptualise the relationship between sexuality and spirituality? Historically, were these primary dimensions of humanness cast in dialectical or diametrically opposed terms?

These preliminary curiosities led me to consider a recursive literature review (Ridley, 2012) in order to distil key theological and psychological insights to deepen my understanding of my topic of enquiry. A recursive literature review involves the core of my research enquiry appearing in this Introductory Chapter, which I address below. The recursive literature review will then re-appear at different points throughout my thesis. Here, my objective is to compare and contrast both theological and psychological perspectives about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and then juxtapose these with my participants' phenomenological experiences. In this way I hope to deepen my analysis and enliven my discussion through a consistent and coherent approach to writing up my thesis. I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 2.

In the meantime, I contemplated recruiting heterosexual and LGBT clergy, once ethical approval was granted, who felt on the periphery of the Church's teaching; such as campaigners, writers and speakers. This was something I knew only too well in my own journey which I now turn to as I reflect upon my experience as "the outsider within".

1.3 Locating Myself within this Research Project: "The Outsider Within"

The notion of "the outsider within" has been a profound theme throughout my life, sometimes unexpected and painful, and at other times liberating and affirming. The personal and psychological meaning that I associate with my phrase "the outsider within" relates to my capacity to fully enter into the centre of different experiences and discourses and then return to the periphery to hold alternative or competing perspectives. In this way I endeavour not to become wedded or driven by singular 'truth' claims but instead aspire to sit with multiple perspectives from a place of nuanced complexity. In a profound way this theme has shaped my sense of self, particularly my spiritual and sexual identity. This feeling of being "the outsider within", while at times alienating, has also afforded me an "outside-in view" rather than an "inside-out view" on ecclesiastical matters relating to faith and sexual ethics; this is particularly relevant having not been raised within the Christian faith espoused by the C of E as an infant onwards. Rather, I came to Christianity as a thirteen-year-old boy, without any formal religious upbringing. This perspective has also encouraged me to aspire to hold multiple truths and realities from a 'both-and' position rather than an 'either/or' stance. This has undoubtedly informed my choices in life both personally and professionally, and the focus of enquiry of this research project.

From a very young age I felt like an “the outsider within” and while I did not have the reflective skills or vocabulary to express this, at a pre-cognitive and visceral level I was all too aware that I did not fit into discrete categories or culturally sanctioned binaries. I was born in 1960 and raised in my home town of Hartlepool in the North East of England, until leaving to study a degree at Coventry (Lanchester) Polytechnic at the age of eighteen. My parents, Margaret (“Maggie”) and Edward (“Toyoy”) came from humble lower working-class beginnings and gypsy stock, respectively. They were not particularly religious in any official sense of the word, but in the face of ongoing poverty they did their very best to financially make ends meet to survive and support a family. From a very early age I was acutely aware of feeling different, economically, socially and politically, and on a personal level I did not resonate with the culturally sanctioned, heteronormative binaries of what it meant to be man living in the North East of England in terms of gender and sexuality.

When I was 13 years of age the local Anglican parish priest, Father Tony Hodgson, visited our Scout group to talk about confirmation. Father Tony captivated and inspired me by his deep sense of holiness and his openness to God that was equally matched by an authentic, earthy grittiness. Without question, my encounter with Father Tony marked the beginning of my growing awareness about my spiritual identity and my deep yearning and searching for God. During this time through my teenage years and entering into adulthood, intermingled with my spiritual desire for God, I also awoke to my sexual feelings for both men and women. As I journeyed into adulthood exploring and experimenting with my sexual awakenings I did not experience any contradiction or enmity between seeking God and enjoying human, sexual love. On the contrary, there have been times when sexual ecstasy with both men and women, have indeed

shown me the presence and nearness of God in human love-making. As a result, I have learned that sexual pleasure can be a vehicle of grace that leads to “sharing in divine ecstasy” (Struzzo, 1989, p.197).

Since becoming ordained in 1987 and 1988, first as a deacon and then as a priest, presided by the then Bishop of Durham, the Rt. Revd. David Jenkins, I have attempted to keep faith with the ethos of Anglicanism which “encourages people to use scripture, tradition and reason to come to a considered view” (<https://churchofengland.org>). Coming to the Christian faith at the age of thirteen and then becoming committed to the C of E with ordination in 1987 as a 26-year-old man, I have deeply valued and continue to appreciate the three strands of Anglicanism. These three strands have supported me to cherish and critique the C of E, both as an “the outsider within” and now as a researcher, as I consider the issue of Christian faith and human sexuality.

Alker (2015) aptly describes this Anglican heritage of Bible, tradition and reason as a three-legged stool, to which the Wesleyan ‘leg’ of *experience* needs to be added to create a four-legged stool when considering matters of Christian faith and human sexuality within the Third Millennium. It is interesting to note that a resolution was passed at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 marking the beginnings of a listening process within the Anglican Communion: “we commit ourselves to listen to the *experience* of homosexual persons” (1998 cited in The Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on human sexuality, 2013, p.2 – italics added). This listening process has now been widened with successive working parties to include both clergy and laity who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered Christians; and on this point,

it feels pertinent that this current research project is designed to elicit and gather participants' lived *experiences* of their embodied sexuality and spirituality, in the form of sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

Subsequently, within my various professional roles to date the issue of sexuality and spirituality has been an ongoing twin fascination and preoccupation for me in terms of understanding how these impulses can contribute to our spiritual growth and psychological development. Previously, I have addressed the critical role that spirituality can exert within the psychotherapeutic process of change (Smith, 2006) and co-wrote a chapter about how erotic transference and counter-transference can be monitored and utilised in the service of healing for the client (Kearns and Smith, 2007). I have also championed the transpersonal and ontological components that together can relationally coalesce or work independently that contribute to the client's change process. By ontological I mean the nature or essence of the human condition that can contribute to the psychotherapeutic process of change. Within this publication I referred to the ontological component as the client's 'inner healer' (homeostatic mechanisms) which can be mobilised, eliciting change, growth and healing. In effect I was defending the client's ontological and transpersonal input in their recovery in the face of a burgeoning discourse about relationality that potentially obscures the client's role in the healing process (Smith, 2015).

During this time of academic and clinical exploration about the generative nature of sexuality and spirituality, I began to be curious about the interrelationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. This was borne out of my hitherto personal experiences

and as a result of a particularly profound and transformative dream I experienced a couple of years earlier while in personal psychotherapy. During my vivid dream there were three single beds in a row side-by-side: to the bed on my right I was in the throes of ecstatic love-making with a woman and to the bed on my left I was in the throes of ecstatic love-making with a man. Simultaneously, a third version of myself entered the room clad in a priest's cassock. This third version of myself lay down on the middle bed. My psychotherapist was visibly moved as I recounted my dream, and after what seemed like a long pause she declared: "You have just experienced a *coniunctio*!" She explained to me that this meant that my dream had revealed and confirmed that my sexuality and spirituality were in a unified relationship, rather than a so-called dichotomous one that continued to be perpetuated by Western Cartesian dualism; and indeed, for the most part, the C of E. This compassionately couched interpretation had a profound resonance with my subjective and intersubjective experiences. In sharp contrast to the C of E's stance regarding the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, I experienced my dream, and my psychotherapist's response, as a profoundly integrating and celebratory one, both in respect of my identity as a C of E priest, and as a sexual and spiritual being.

My aforementioned personal experiences and professional interests, along with my pivotal dream, spurred me on to enrol and undertake further academic study in Jungian and Post-Jungian Studies at the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex University. It was here that I submitted my master's thesis using a case study methodology entitled: '*Can a Jungian application of the concepts of Eros and Self produce a distinctive understanding of the continued success and popularity of Madonna?*' (Smith, 2008, unpublished). As I critically review this piece of research,

with the gift of hindsight, I can appreciate how my case study approach provided me with an exciting opportunity to test pre-existing theories for the topic at hand (McLeod, 2010). And equally, how my unconscious bias (Flyvbjerg, 2006) could have influenced my findings due to the overly-subjective hazards associated within a single case study. Hence, my resolve to undertake my current research project to acquire an extensive, rich and comprehensive account about the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Consequently, I recruited twenty-two C of E participants across the heterosexual and LGBT spectrum to provide a well-developed and substantiated account of this phenomenon.

The aforementioned theme of “the outsider within”, unbeknownst to me, became pivotal in terms of my rationale for recruiting a purposive sample. That is, seeking out those heterosexual and LGBT clergy whose experiences complemented my own stance as “the outsider within”. This led me to enlist participants who have both loved and served the C of E and who were not afraid to be faithful to their experience of their sexual and spiritual ecstasy; even if this was contrary to the Church’s official teaching on the matter. As a result, I have travelled the length and breadth of England, meeting with clergy who were living and working in the diocese of Blackburn, Chichester, Durham, Exeter, Guildford, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, Oxford, Southwark and Winchester.

As I considered my personal experience and professional involvement with Eros (sexual libido or impulse) and Self (religious libido or impulse) in my own journey (Jung, 1967; TePaske, 2008), alongside my standing as a C of E priest, it seemed

advantageous and permissible that I was best placed to undertake such a research project on several grounds. Firstly, I have had an embodied and visceral experience of a fusion of sexual and spiritual ecstasy in terms of sacred-sex (Feuerstein, 1992) in my own life. Hence, I have known something of the psychological and phenomenological impact of this type of mystical experience from an 'inside-out' position. This has certainly helped me to attune to such reported states and thoughtfully invite further disclosure (data) from my participants through open-ended prompts. Secondly, I already have some working knowledge of the topic at hand prior to embarking upon this research project, which has certainly expanded and deepened through undertaking a rigorous literature review. And finally, given the delicate and sensitive nature of the subject of enquiry, being a fellow priest, as well as a researcher, was significant, by and large, in putting potential participants at ease. They seemingly perceived and shared a sense of identity and belonging which possibly elicited, for the most part, greater transparency and depth of disclosure during the semi-structured interviews. However, these very 'strengths' could equally become potential blind spots given the subjective and intersubjective nature of interpersonal communication. By adopting a qualitative methodology incorporating the rule of epoche (Husserl, 1931/67) I aspired to bracket-off my own preconceptions; as much as this was humanly possible. Reflexivity and the recruitment of a Critical Research Friend was another vital way of monitoring my own biases which I reflect upon in greater detail in Chapter 3.

When I began this research journey I was mindful of the fear that some LGBT clergy might have been experiencing given the vociferous and acrimonious nature of the debates that were taking place within the C of E regarding those priests who were

openly or secretly engaged in same-sex relationships or civil partnerships. Consequently, I decided to dedicate the focus of my research upon the mystical experiences of potential participants as a way of stimulating interest in the project and allaying any fears about the data being used politically. My concern here was that some LGBT participants might wrongly deduce that a political focus would require them to take a public stand on these matters or that by contributing to a polemical study this might unwittingly lead them to being identified in some way. So, in the Participant Information sheet, with conscious intent, I laboured the ethos of my research project to this end. However, with the gift hindsight I can appreciate that I was clearly caught up in an internal struggle or dilemma regarding the separation of the political from the spiritual. This may account for the polemical quote that appears at the top of the Participation Information sheet which is clearly at odds with the mystical focus outlined underneath (Please see Appendix A). Likewise, this political strand, which clearly interweaves with the mystical one throughout this thesis, does not appear in the form of a question alongside the four questions that appear in subsection 1.6 below.

As I reflect further on my dilemma regarding the separation of the political from the spiritual, and how these two distinct strands have nevertheless clearly manifested within this thesis, it feels expedient to explore the personal and contextual factors that have contributed and added to this process. Firstly, I hold that the spiritual is the political. To my mind, when the spiritual life becomes solely dedicated to personal transcendence, it runs the risk of becoming a privatised affair thereby sidestepping issues of oppression and social injustice. Ferrer's (2011) participatory or relational approach to the transpersonal is pertinent here, which aims to counteract the potential

for the spiritual life becoming a privatised endeavour. He argues that when transpersonal experiences are relationally mediated this will potentially inspire and mobilise people to actively campaign against human injustice, exploitation and suffering as these occur within the individual, social, political and ecological domains of life. I return to this salient point in greater detail in Chapter 2. Secondly, while undertaking my participant interviews, to my surprise, most of the contributors expressed their political views regarding the House of Bishops as a result of my final and somewhat innocuous question: "Is there anything else you would like to say on the topic of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality for C of E clergy that my previous questions have not elicited?" It is also important to note that a couple of participants expressed their political opinions about the House of Bishops' handling of same-sex issues as this related to themselves and their fellow clergy during the interview. This was a sobering reminder that, against my better judgement, separating the polemical from the spiritual was somewhat of an artificial exercise for both myself and clearly for my participants. These personal and contextual factors have undoubtedly shaped the writing up of this thesis and hence the reader will encounter the priest as phenomenological researcher and the priest as socio-political activist, interweaving and alternating as figure and ground, throughout this discussion.

A further ramification of the above was that the extensive literature review, as the reader will discover, investigated and critiqued theological and transpersonal accounts about the nature, relationship and experience of sexual and spiritual ecstasy without reviewing other forms of mystical union with God. I can fully appreciate that if I had solely focused upon the mystical union with God through the veil of sexual ecstasy and then compared this with evidential accounts regarding non-sexual forms of

spiritual ecstasy, this could have added further validity and gravitas to my findings. It is interesting to note that during the semi-structured interview my initial questions enquired about such encounters with the Divine. What transpired was a significant superordinate theme that testified to participants experiencing the sacred in their lives through a range of activities. These included, listening to sacred music, attending a church liturgy, visiting prisoners, attending to the sick, art, jogging, swimming, walking by the sea, sharing a bottle of wine and engaging in good conversation, to name but a few. The descriptors used to describe these experiences included the dissolution of time and space as existential categories, with respondents reporting a deep sense of the sacred touching and transforming their sense of self and the world around them: a deep sense of Oneness pervaded whereby self and other boundaries were suspended during this process. Afterwards, they felt reinvigorated in their relationship with God, more connected in their daily relationships and the world around them, and further fortified to deal with the challenges of their ministry as C of E clergy. Not including this superordinate theme in Chapter 4 arose out of my growing reluctance, discussed above, regarding the depoliticization of the spiritual realm, particularly as this relates to LGBT clergy serving the C of E. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the same aforementioned descriptors that were used to describe non-sexual encounters with the Divine, were also used by the twelve participants who reported experiencing God through the veil of sexual ecstasy.

Having traced the personal, professional and contextual threads that have shaped this research project and ultimately contributed to its final form, it will now be crucial to provide a brief overview of existing research outcomes that have specifically focused upon C of E clergy to date. I will then compare and contrast these with important

transpersonal research projects that have compellingly explored the mystical nature of sexual ecstasy. By highlighting these research findings and comparing these significant transpersonal studies, I intend to further add to my growing rationale as to why I have pursued this current line of research enquiry.

1.4 Church of England Clergy: Recent Research Outcomes

Several research projects exploring the relationship between sexuality and spirituality for C of E clergy have been undertaken in recent years. These researches enquires have primarily recruited and focused upon those clergy within the C of E who identify as gay. These include: a case study analysis to highlight the sociological implications about the C of E's guidance on appointing bishops in relation to gay priests and the Equality Act of 2010 (Clucas, 2012); an ethnographic study exploring the C of E's position of barring same-sex relationships from ordained ministry (Ledbetter, 2017); and a study using a poststructuralist methodology exploring a biographical account of two gay priests. One biographical text came from an anonymised priest and the other from a published record in respect of Canon Jeffrey John. This research revealed the C of E's enduring thematic discourse of purity/pollution and text/authority to prohibit and police gay clergy from embodying their sexuality in positive and affirming ways (Nixon, 2008).

Maxwell's (2012) extensive and uncompromising research deserves a special mention at this point into why gay clergy continue to live out their priestly vocation in the face of the C of E's hypocrisy. She concludes that gay clergy continue to faithfully serve the Church from a deep place of transcendent vocation despite the C of E's continuing

“determination to maintain that heterosexual relationships are at the heart of the divine plan [granting it] permission to discriminate in a way that in secular situations is now illegal (2013, p.31). Finally, Hooper’s (2015) moving autobiographical account of coming to terms with his gay identity and orientation as a C of E priest deserves special comment. He reminds us of the Church’s protracted inability to theologically and publicly affirm the God-given, distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy; particularly as this relates to heterosexual and non-heterosexual relationships outside of Christian marriage.

While these various studies add invaluable weight to the discussion about the C of E’s current crisis relating to the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, they nevertheless exclusively focus upon those clergy who identify as gay. This was another deciding factor informing my research rationale to execute an inclusive project to gather data on this topic from heterosexual and LGBT clergy. I will return to this point shortly after reviewing significant transpersonal studies that have explored mystical encounters through sexual ecstasy.

1.5 Mystical Encounters through Sexual Ecstasy

Research exploring the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy is a well-established and legitimate topic of enquiry within the field of psychology. For example, Wade (2004) enlisted 91 participants from across the heterosexual, gay and bisexual spectrum for her phenomenological study to explore sexual and spiritual ecstasy. An overwhelming majority of participants reported that their experience of sexual ecstasy with a lover had led to a non-ordinary experience of the sacred. In

effect, sexual ecstasy unveiled the sacred to these participants that was both illuminating and transformative. Significantly, participants claimed that they did not have a spiritual framework to make sense of these moments of mystical union with the sacred; and that by and large they did not disclose their experiences, even to their lover. Wade designates such moments with the appellation, “transcendent sex”. She states:

Transcendent sex is (...) going beyond the bodies that encapsulate our separate selves, our senses, our egos, our climaxes, and our suffering, but without leaving those bodies behind. They become a vehicle for a grace that transfigures all of the human condition. The nexus of Spirit and flesh illuminates and sanctifies all creation. It allows us to see everything, even our naked bodies and our physical desires, in the incandescence of perfect beauty, holiness and love. (ibid, p.261)

She adds further clarification to her findings noting that transcendent sex can involve an altered state of consciousness for one or both of the lovers, which breaks through space and time and one's sense of self. Simultaneously, there is a sense of a supernatural force breaking through that is associated to Spirit. And that ultimately, transcendent sex is rooted in relationship, with the relationship becoming the ground of spiritual awareness and ecstasy.

Upon critically and favourably reviewing Wade's substantial research on the topic about transcendent sex, Hastings (2004) notes that “[m]ost of Wade's participants were well educated, and often came from audiences at her talks on this subject” (p.102). In her defense, Wade acknowledges her bias and attempts to justify her rationale for accessing potential participants through her personal and professional contacts, or by word of mouth, on two counts. Firstly, she argues that it was more desirable to recruit co-researchers in this way rather than enlist participants through

the usual means of print or electronic media requests. In short, she was primarily concerned that if she approached potential contributors to her research through this means, then some people might be suspicious, or fearful, that this was a hoax. Secondly, Wade maintained that by using contacts from people who had attended her workshops on transcendent sex she could guarantee a purposive sample of participants' who would sympathetically respond to the intent of her research study.

Even so, her findings about transcendent sex are reminiscent of Wolfson's (2008) understanding of how mystical experiences involve the intricate dance between concealment and exposure. This dance involves a tension between organized religion underscoring the other-worldly, transcendent and hidden nature of God and our deep human, and therefore, psychological need for this God to be revealed within the this-worldly and immanent realm of experience. During transcendent sex there is a mystical unveiling moving from a state of concealment to exposure, and then back again, with participants' reporting an altered-state of consciousness accompanied by a sense of personal transformation, as a result of this heightened experience.

I discovered Little's (2010) abstract from *Dissertation Abstracts International* wherein she explicates her desire to ascertain whether Wade's (2004) findings might be replicated for those women identifying as lesbian. Little notes that Wade's sample was largely heterogeneous with some gay, lesbian and bisexual participants taking part, but that primarily her respondents were heterosexual. As well as applying Wade's units of meaning to discern whether transcendent sex was experienced by 69 lesbians who took part, she interfaced these categories with Karin Loftus Carrington's 4 patterns of love and individuation. Narrative accounts were used to gather data using a semi-

structured interview. What transpired was that 10 altered-state categories were replicated from Wade's study, with a further eight new categories emerging in respect of the 69 lesbian participants'. These eight new categories are: Oneness, Boundlessness, Sex as Spirituality, the Feminine, Gender Bending, Astral Sex, Partner as Deity, and Collective of Women. Another study that focused primarily upon the experiences of women was conducted by Osborne (2005). She wanted to explore the relationship between sexuality and spirituality for 33 women in mid-life using a 25-question survey. The participants were in general agreement that mid-life brought into focus the importance of spirituality and spiritual growth and development. She concluded that as a result "sexuality as a vehicle for the perception of spirituality has gained focus" (ibid, p.37) for these women in mid-life.

Next, MacKnee's (1997) work is important to review given his focus on practising Christians. He investigated the experiences of profound sexual and spiritual encounters for heterosexual Christian laity. He recruited five men and five women from five different Christian denominations who had encountered their sexuality and spirituality in a unitary way. He employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to undertake his research project. Participants' reported that during profound sexual experiences they encountered God in their love-making that dissolved their hitherto perception of dualism as this related to the gender binary of male/female. As a result of this process:

The body is affirmed and joins with the spirit in celebrating euphoric union. Both are vehicles for worship. At the same time dualism between genders also evaporates. Both genders are equally valued and appreciated. Theologically, during these peak moments humans could experience full redemption from the alienating shame and fear that accompanies sin and

separates humans from God and humans from each other (Genesis 3:10).
(ibid, pp.182-183)

Here, MacKnee is clearly suggesting that sexual ecstasy leading to spiritual ecstasy has a redemptive quality, which he clearly links to the The Fall.

A further study that warrants our attention is Elfers (2009) doctoral research in transpersonal psychology which explored the relationship between the sacred and the sexual; and how human sexuality can be a potential conduit to spiritual growth and development. The impetus for his research comes from his awareness of the cultural conflict that exists in the West between the expressions of human sexuality on the one hand and the religious injunctions that prize the sacred above and beyond the sexual on the other. Consequently, Elfers posed the following research question: 'What is the experience of cultivating the ecstatic potentials of sexuality as transpersonal development?' To answer this question, he interviewed 8 co-participants (4 women and 4 men) using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. Three semi-structured interviews were used to explore each participant's lived experience of their sexuality as a transpersonal discipline or spiritual path. The data was subjected to a Thematic Content Analysis. Through his findings Elfers' concluded that:

[C]o-researchers had a blissful, transcendent experience initiated by sexual arousal, whether at the time of awakening or subsequent to it. The transcendent features of the experience were synonymous with the classic features of transcendence triggered by other events. These blissful states were highly embodied experiences. They seemed to open doorways to new and genuine ecstatic experiences and a heightened sense of new possibilities for growth. (p.119)

Such blissful and unitive experiences of the sacred and the sexual led participants to "a feeling of dissonance [from their] familiar worldview" (p.120). As a result, previously held dualisms between male/female, masculine/feminine, and subject/object, inner/outer and transcendent/embodied were radically dissolved resulting in "a sense of Oneness" (p.121). This sense of Oneness led participants to "a transformation in purpose, meaning or direction" in their respective chosen careers (p.120). A further ramification of these intense transpersonal experiences led participants to develop "a more intense bonding with sexual and romantic partners" (p.120).

As I review these significant studies exploring the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy I am immediately struck that, to my knowledge, such an investigation into the mystical nature of sexual ecstasy has never been undertaken specifically with C of E clergy in mind. As well as designing a research project with an inclusive agenda in mind (given the exclusive focus upon gay clergy in previous undertakings), I also hope that such an endeavour will elicit rich information across the heterosexual and LGBT spectrum about the distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Here, I will be hoping to uncover significant clusters of relationship within the data that will add further weight to my research findings. However, to reiterate, this is by no means a comparative study as indicated previously but an inclusive one.

On this note of inclusivity, I also wish to register my awareness that transgender issues relate to gender dissonance *per se* (Beardsley and O'Brien, 2016) rather than sexuality. However, given the gaps in the immediate research field, it felt essential and timely to explore the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for

priests across the heterosexual and non-heterosexual spectrum, not only from a place of inclusion but of celebration, too. This imperative felt all the more exacting when one considers that: “The ongoing church ‘debates’ about sexuality – usually about homosexuality – often leave lesbian and gay people feeling excluded. Trans people tend to feel even further excluded from the debate, and from the lesbian and gay response to it” (Beardsley and O’Brien, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, significant research into how transgendered clergy experience their sexual and spiritual ecstasy is clearly lacking. Here, I hope that this will add further substance to my rationale for undertaking this unique and innovative research study.

1.6 Research Design: Impetus and Methodology

As will be gleaned from my discussion thus far, there are several strands that have interwoven to inform my rationale and impetus for designing this inventive research project to explore the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E. These strands include: my personal experience of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004); my professional interest about the generative role that sexuality and the transpersonal can play in human growth and spiritual development (Smith, 2006; Kearns and Smith, 2007; and Smith, 2015); finding inspiration from various theologians (e.g. Carr, 2003; Loader, 2013; Nelson, 1978) and several transpersonal psychologists (e.g. Haule, 2010; TePaske, 2008; Wade, 2004; Wilber, 2000) who argue that sexual passion can be a portal to encountering God; and finally, a deeply held and sincere hope that my findings might offer an alternative perspective on the conflicted relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, leading to a deeper resolution on this matter for the C of E and its clergy.

On the criticality of this last point, as a result of a published conversation with Dr Ho Law, Professor Les Lancaster shares his conviction thus: “[T]he role of Transpersonal Psychology is connected with that process towards reconciliation of difference” (2011, p.337). This can be achieved by empirically exploring the embodied relevance of sexual and spiritual ecstasy for a “contemporary understanding of the mind and psychological growth” (p.335). This transpersonal enterprise of reconciling sexual and spiritual ecstasy is also echoed in the work of the existentialist Paul Ricoeur. He argues that, “[a]ll our problems concerning sexuality seems to have come from the collapse of an ancient understanding of the sacred which gave almost total meaning to human sexuality” (1964, p.133). Nelson helpfully notes that historically Ricoeur understood the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy to span three major stages:

The earliest stage closely identified the two forces, incorporating sexuality into religious myth and ritual. In the second stage, accompanying the rise of the great world religions the two spheres were separated: the sacred became increasingly transcendent while sexuality was demythologized and confined to a small part of the earthly order (procreation within institutionalized marriage). Sexuality’s power was feared, restrained and disciplined. (1987, p.187)

Ricoeur recognised a third stage when sexual and spiritual ecstasy would be reunited. The aforementioned transpersonal intention to reconcile differences and the existential forecast that sexual and spiritual ecstasy would once again need to be reunited is at the heart of this thesis. It is my hope that in some small way the findings of my research may contribute to this evolving process of re-integration that is gradually gaining momentum both within theological circles and transpersonal research.

It is my deeply held conviction that just as sexual ecstasy can be a veil that is lifted by the grace of God to encounter the depths of the divine, I also believe a similar process

is at play, which is embodied within my proposed methodology of integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Both the hermeneutic and transpersonal spirit that will be applied in the process of analysing my participants' interviews involves peeling back and uncovering several layers of meaning about the sacred underpinnings of our nature. The double-hermeneutic espoused by Smith et al. (2009) is relevant here, in that, just as the participant is trying to make sense of their world, I am likewise trying to analyse the participant's levels of meaning. Fusing this hermeneutic stance with a transpersonal sensitivity, therefore, allows for both scientific rigour and a soulful presence to coexist when encountering my participants' embodied experiences. Having reviewed several research projects above that have explored the manifestation of mystical union through sexual ecstasy, I am struck that these studies invariably used a qualitative approach, specifically an IPA methodology. By integrating Transpersonal Awareness with IPA my intention is to occupy what Vale and Mohs, (1998) have come to term *transintentionality*. They argue that transintentionality becomes an indispensable:

[B]ridge between existential/humanistic and transpersonal/transcendent approaches to psychology. It is here that we are called to recognise the radical distinction between the reflective/prereflective realm and pure consciousness, between rational/emotive processes and transcendent/spiritual awareness, of intentional knowing of the finite and being the finite. (p.102)

Hence, my proposed transpersonal-phenomenological awareness (integrating Transpersonal Awareness with IPA) supports me to distinguish and attune to those mystical experiences that are given or emerge as pure consciousness and transcendent awareness. In this way, following in Vale and Mohs footsteps, I hope to gather deeper levels of experience and meaning about the emergence of mystical union through sexual ecstasy that a transpersonal-phenomenological approach

secures; allowing rich data to emerge from “a noumenal, unitive space within” alongside phenomenal experiences manifesting as a result of intentional consciousness (p.100).

Returning to the point made earlier about both my participants’ and myself having a shared, common identity as C of E priests, employing a transpersonally orientated methodology also appears to be a justifiable way of honouring both our shared ontological and epistemological worldviews. Namely, that ontologically, our human nature is imbued “with the sacred, the numinous, the holy – the soul, the spirit, the divine” (Rowan, 2005, p.1); and that epistemologically, the way of knowing “the numinous” (Otto, 1958, p.7) or “the sacred” (Eliade, 1957, p.10) is through embodied, phenomenological experience. In other words, by integrating a transpersonal awareness with IPA I am giving due reverence to our shared belief in a unifying God who sacralises everyday reality. In sharp contrast, many phenomenological studies reviewed earlier in our discussion tend to lend themselves to gathering participants’ notions as to how they conceptualise or understand God. Hence, a purely existential-phenomenological awareness (IPA) would focus upon consciousness as an intentional activity such as an object, or a person or an idea. Consequently, an existential-phenomenological awareness on its own runs the risk of overlooking or minimising my participants’ encounters with the divine relegating these to mere cultural artefact or pure social constructivism. I will return to this critical distinction in greater detail in Chapter 3 when I discuss my methodology.

By way of summation, the four essential questions that have become the impetus for this research study exploring the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E are as follows:

1. What is the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy?
2. Are sexual and spiritual ecstasy experienced in a diametrically opposed relationship or a unified one?
3. If the sacred is encountered through sexual ecstasy, is this through particular sexual practices employed by participants or are these moments 'given'?
4. How do such moments inform and shape participants' spiritual growth and psychological development?

1.7 Conclusion and Outline of Thesis

In this Introductory Chapter I have provided a working definition of sexual and spiritual ecstasy and forwarded a more textured, nuanced and complex understanding of the terms sexuality and gender. I have also submitted a brief history, including the current disagreements and debates that continue to divide the C of E, regarding the inclusion of sexually active LGBT clergy in the life of the Church as an important contextual backdrop to my research enquiry. I have also highlighted both my personal and professional interests about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and how I might be best placed to conduct this current research. Notwithstanding, the potential blind spots, pitfalls and biases connected to this will need to be scrutinised and thoroughly addressed in Chapter 3. Critically, I have carefully reviewed the current research exploring the experience of gay clergy serving the C of E and juxtaposed this with several significant transpersonal studies exploring the mystical nature of sexual ecstasy. Throughout my discussion I have discursively underlined various strands that

have collectively culminated in my rationale for implementing this pioneering research project.

In the remaining chapters I will address the following: In Chapter 2, I will provide a detailed account of my literature review. In Chapter 3, I will discuss how this translated into my research methodology, reflecting upon the research procedures that were undertaken to recruit participants, and the protocols that were taken to record, analyse and present the data at hand. In Chapter 4, the superordinate themes will be highlighted and discussed. In Chapter 5, the implications of this research will be discussed. Here, I will briefly summarise my findings and make suggestions and recommendations for future research to explore the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy serving the C of E as priests, before concluding in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

As indicated within the previous chapter, a recursive literature review (Ridley, 2012) permits me to highlight the core themes and subthemes of my thesis in the Introductory Chapter and then return to these at other significant points throughout my thesis. A recursive literature review, then, allows for the salient arguments from theology and psychology to re-appear and juxtapose these insights with my participants' lived experiences, in order to bring greater illumination about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Highlighting these key theological and psychological perspectives and interfacing them with phenomenological experiences is in keeping with Heron's (1998) position. He argues that research conducted with a transpersonal orientation needs to draw upon multiple fields of enquiry including theology, psychology, phenomenology, philosophy and sociology, because together "these various strands can support our understanding of spiritual and subtle experiences; both revealing the stages or processes that underpin them and how these altered states of consciousness can impact the human condition" (ibid, p.1). As will be gleaned from the Introductory Chapter these strands have already appeared in order to bring greater texture and insight to this research project.

To my said recursive literature review I am also adding Griffin's (1988) guidance that such an exploration of sexual and spiritual ecstasy requires a constructive approach. A constructive approach, as opposed to reductive one, enables me to draw upon the perceived wisdom from the pre-modern, modern and post-modern epochs of human history and collect divergent and convergent views about the relationship between

sexual and spiritual ecstasy from across the eons of human history. In this way, I aim to trace the significant twists and turns within Christianity that occurred during the pre-modern period that eventually separated the sexual and spiritual impulses. This will be put side by side with what Ricoeur (1964) called the third stage of human history when sexual and spiritual ecstasy would finally come together. Here, theological, psychological and phenomenological viewpoints will be interspersed within the second and third stages, to construct a more nuanced and critical reading about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. I will, therefore, seamlessly move backwards and forwards between different historical vantage points during this recursive literature review to enrich our discussion at hand.

In turn, I intend to use the insights that emerge from this recursive literature review to adopt a pertinent research methodology for my topic of enquiry in order to explore my participants' lived experiences in this regard. Furthermore, insights drawn from this literature review will also support me to formulate incisive questions, sensitively pitched, for the semi-structured interview so as to extrapolate indispensable data from heterosexual, LGBT clergy of the C of E. In other words, I plan to use the ideas from this literature review to defend my research enquiry and explain the selection of methods employed, which I address in greater depth in Chapter 3. In this way I aim to demonstrate that this research hopefully contributes something innovative to the current impasse between sexual and spiritual ecstasy that continues to dominate the C of E's recent discussions and debates.

2.1 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: Biblical Perspectives

During this subsection I will critically discuss the significant variables that collectively compel the early Christian Community to move away from the Old Testament's unconditional and positive view about the inherent goodness of sexual ecstasy between a married man and woman (regardless of procreation) to a conditional and somewhat negative one. The unconditional and positive impulsion clearly appears in some of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. However, this God-given endorsement becomes somewhat diluted with alternative teachings being proffered as Jesus becomes primarily focused upon the realisation of the Kingdom of Heaven, here on earth. In this regard, marriage, sexual union and childbearing become potential distractions to discipleship and the accomplishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. This eschatological orientation was already well established in the Epistles or Letters that were sent to various early Christian Communities long before the Gospels were written. In essence this eschatological orientation had within it the possibility of a world-denying, body-denying and sex-denying outlook that, as we shall see, was unwittingly exacerbated by Paul the Apostle and further amplified by the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo. Accordingly, "abstinence and asceticism became hallmarks of the early Christian era, casting a shadow on sexuality still felt today" (Wade, 2002, p.6).

2.1.1 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy within Heterosexual Marriage

Obach (2009) highlights four Hebrew attitudes towards sexuality in the Old Testament. Firstly, that sexual relations are a 'normal' part of everyday life; secondly, that sexual intercourse was designed to increase the number of God's people, and that this was

about fortifying the numbers of the nation, and securing safety, in the face of threat from other tribes or nations; thirdly, that sexual activity was, given the patriarchal bias of the time, the prerogative of the men; and finally, that passionate sexual love-making between a man and a woman was natural and good. Various biblical texts bear this out. For example, in the first Creation story in the Book of Genesis the author states: "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them and God said unto them: Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1: 27-28). Significantly, there is a shift away from procreation in the second and yet older Creation story, where the indivisibility of man and woman is underscored as God uses the rib from Adam's side to create Woman. Adam declares "This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2: 24). This mythological account of woman being created out of man is perhaps "one of the very early explanations of sexual desire: as the desire to reunite" (Loader, 2013, p. 11). The author of Genesis goes on to emphatically note: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2: 25). Clearly, as Adam and Eve dwell in the Garden of Eden they fear no shame or humiliation in their nakedness. On the contrary, they were in a pre-cognitive or pre-reflective state of consciousness, connected and communing with each other and the world around them, without any conscious trace of embarrassment or shame. Obach notes that this mythical account of the Creation means "that man and woman can accept as God's gifts such accompaniments of the marital act as bonding, pleasure, comfort, security, affirmation, joy, passion, and even ecstasy" (2009, p. 6).

On this last point, the Biblical Song of Songs - sometimes referred to as the Song of Solomon - similarly endorses God's unconditional acceptance of sexual desire,

pleasure and ecstasy between a man and a woman (Obach, 2009). From Carr's perspective the poetical ecstasy of the Song of Songs "links with the Garden of Eden in envisioning humans in a garden of love, but it asserts that the possibility of such Eros has not been lost" (2003, p.109). The ramification of this, to my mind, is that the Godliness of sexual ecstasy between a man and woman has not become relegated to the Garden of Eden after The Fall. On the contrary, the God-given nature of sexual ecstasy, according to the Song of Songs, is a continuous blessing and joy within marriage even after The Fall. While the man and woman do not consummate their sexual longings explicitly in the Song of Songs, their erotically charged exchanges are undeniably overt throughout the text. Here are some examples:

Female Lover:

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
For thy love is better than wine" (1:1).

Male Lover:

"Behold thou art fair my love; behold thou art fair;
Thine eyes are as doves" (1:15).

Male Lover:

"I said, I will climb up into the palm tree,
I will take hold of the branches thereof:
Let thy breasts be like clusters of the vine,
And the smell of thy breath like apples;
And thy mouth like the best wine,
That goeth down smoothly for my beloved,
Gliding through the lips of those who are asleep" (7:8-9).

Female Lover:

"Set me a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm:
For love is strong as death;
Jealousy is cruel as the grave:
The flashes thereof are flashes of fire,
A very flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it:
If a man gives all the substance of his house for love,
He would be utterly contemned" (8:6-7).

Stuart (2003) values how the male and female lovers in the Song of Songs are presented as equals with no mention of procreation. Likewise, Feuerstein appreciates the “wonderful mutuality and equality between the lovers, who adore each other unashamedly” (1992, p.98). This is reminiscent of the significantly older Creation story in Genesis 2 discussed above. Carr (2003), however, notes that the woman in the Song of Songs is more sexually powerful in her erotic seduction and delight, at least in her male-lover’s eyes. He notes that this flouts Israel’s patriarchal strictures of the day whereby “the husband would claim exclusive power over his wife’s devotion, and his wife dutifully, indeed passionately, having children to continue his line” (Carr, 2003, p.129). On this last point, Feuerstein (1992) agrees that this erotically charged text between the man and the woman is atypical for its time. In a very real sense the exploration of unbridled erotic desire and love which the man and woman exemplify in the Song of Songs contravenes the spiritual and sexual customs and mores of the day.

An initial reading of the Song of Songs strongly suggests that this is a text that unashamedly celebrates the erotic delights and pleasures of physical love between a man and a woman. It is an axiomatic statement about the goodness of sexual ecstasy as a continuing, unconditional blessing from God. This is the position of Carr (2003) who contends that the Song of Songs is a non-theological erotic love poem that would have been sung by the ancient Israelites during certain feasts where wine and food would prefigure during such celebrations. However, in sharp contrast to this initial reading many of the rabbis initially understood the Song of Songs as an allegorical

poem: the man in the Song of Songs is God and the woman is Israel. Feuerstein sympathetically contends that:

We can understand why the compilers of the Hebrew canon had qualms about including this work. They got around their difficulties by de-eroticising the poems and interpreting the passion between these two anonymous lovers as an allegory for the love between Yahweh and the Jews. (1992, p.98).

In other words, the overtly sexualised and erotic language of the Song of Songs was spiritualised and used to explain the depth and intensity of the non-sexual, covenanted relationship between Israel and God. In a different direction, in the 13th-century Jewish Kabbalah would apply a different exegesis to the Song of Songs to foster a mystical rapprochement between the Divine masculine and feminine, reconciling sexual and spiritual ecstasy in order:

To image the believer's passionate attachment to various feminine principles: the divine Torah, the in-dwelling Shekinah. [In other words] the Song has been a way of imagining a love relationship with a feminine divinity, and not just being a way of being a woman in love with a male god. (Carr, 2003, p.143)

Feuerstein (1992), takes a different view and wonders whether the Song of Songs draws upon earlier pagan traditions. As a result, he understands this biblical text as a lyrical myth celebrating the sacred marriage or *hieros gamos* between a god and a goddess: in all probability the Canaanite Baal and his sister-spouse Anat. It is interesting to note Neill's (2009) passionate and timely critique about the propensity of later generations to embellish religious motifs onto ancient erotic texts (or vice versa, as we shall see later in our discussion, in the case of St John of the Cross) thereby desexualising critical texts through a process of spiritualization. Neill cautions against "the projection of modern religious sensibilities and attitudes toward sexuality onto the literature of an ancient people with a radically different view of sex" (2009, p.91). In

this regard he certainly resonates with Carr's (2003) contention, previously stated, that the Song of Songs is simply a non-theological erotic poem.

Similarly, different Christian scholars have subjected the Song of Songs to various metaphorical and allegorical interpretations. Primarily, it appears, that this arose out of the discomfort that some early Church Fathers' felt about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. The chthonic account of sexual ecstasy embodied in the Song of Songs jarred with the spiritual emphasis of other Biblical texts. Origen (185-254) for example was one such theological scholar. On the one hand, he provided a compelling mystical analysis of chapters 1:1 - 3:6 of the Song of Songs by equating these chapters with the three levels of body, soul and spirit. He then likened this, respectively, to bodily marriage, the love between Christ and his Church and a love song between God and the individual soul. On the other hand, he instructed Christians not to read the Song of Songs until they had completely expunged "the vexations of the flesh and blood" (Origen, cited in Obach, 2009, p.7). One can only imagine the levels of inner conflict and turmoil that Origen wrestled with regarding his own relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

On the one hand, it would appear that it is inconclusive and perhaps even inconsequential whether one approaches the Song of Songs as a non-religious love poem or as an allegorical, spiritual account about the relationship between Israel and God, or Christ and his Church. On the other hand, when considering the Song of Songs what becomes incontestable is that "if procreation is the essential purpose of

sex and marriage, one is hard-pressed to explain its absence from this entire book of the Bible that is devoted to sex and marriage” (Brownson, 2013, p.116).

In a similar vein to Origen, St. Augustine of Hippo’s inner conflict and turmoil about his relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy becomes all too apparent in his exegesis of The Fall (Genesis 3). His interpretation undoubtedly adds to the ‘pelvic anxiety that has haunted the western church for nearly nineteen centuries’ (Obach, 2009, p. 7). According to Obach (2003), St. Augustine made two mistaken, and somewhat unwarranted, assumptions when interpreting Genesis 3. Firstly, that Adam and Eve did not engage in sexual intercourse prior to The Fall, and therefore, from Augustine’s perspective sexual desire, pleasure and ecstasy are all linked to sin. Secondly, using Psalm 51: 7 which states: “In iniquity I was conceived”, Augustine asserts his belief that sexual intercourse automatically transmits the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. By “ignoring those texts of Genesis that asserted the goodness of sexual intercourse and its blessed fertility, St. Augustine made the assumption that every person after Adam and Eve was conceived in iniquity” (Obach, 2009, p. 43). The ramification of this led later Christians to believe that “God had condemned humanity to eternal damnation through Adam’s sexual act” (Wade, 2002, p.6).

In addition to this distortion about the original blessing (Fox, 1983) that sexual desire, pleasure and ecstasy can engender between a man and a woman (indicated by Genesis 2:25), The Fall has arguably been used to theologically (and sociologically) subordinate women in relation to men:

Not [as] the result of nature but rather sin. Noteworthy also is the fact that the 'division of labor' (sic) theme is placed in the context of the effects of The Fall. The man is now associated with the task of conquering nature. The woman is seen only in the context of the burdens involved in reproduction. (Daly, 1968, p. 37)

In sharp contrast to this patriarchal application of The Fall, along with St. Augustine desacralizing the origins of sexual ecstasy between a man and a woman, Loader (2013) maintains that Genesis 3 is better understood as a mythological explanation for the idyllic loss of Edenic bliss. In the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) Eve tempts Adam to eat of the God-forbidden fruit. In doing so they both know good and evil as God knows good and evil (Genesis 3:5), and as their eyes open they see each other in their nakedness and sew fig leaves and aprons to cover their genitalia (Genesis 3:7). Self-consciousness, embarrassment and shame now replace Adam and Eve's Edenic bliss. However, the mythical story of The Fall is far more exacting as an allegorical attempt to make sense of the existence of violence, vulnerability, suffering in childbirth, sin and judgement with the unequivocal and overriding message to respectfully "live within God's creation in a way that God has ordered it" (Loader, 2013, p. 31).

Conclusively:

The creation stories in Genesis 1-2 and the account of God's judgement as a result of sin in the garden in Genesis 3 assured them [the Jews] that creation was good, including being human with all that that entails, and not least sexuality which is directly addressed in these stories. (Loader, 2013, p. 30)

In short, Genesis 1-3 can be best understood as an aetiological myth to explain the Godly beginnings of life and the institutions that have been ordained to regulate it.

In line with the Book of Genesis and the Song of Songs, the historical Jesus of Nazareth, both as a Jew and a Rabbi, endorses the sanctity and goodness of sexual ecstasy between a man and a woman within marriage in his teachings. So, for example, in the Gospel of Mark Jesus proclaims:

But from the beginning of the creation, male and female he made he them. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the twain shall become one flesh: so that they are no more twain but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. (Mark: 6 - 9)

Immediately after this point Jesus also teaches his disciples: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her: and if she herself shall put away her husband, and marry another, she committeth adultery" (Mark: 11 - 12). What is apparent from this text is something more critical about adultery rather than promulgating procreation as the *raison d'être* of marriage.

As well as Jesus' clear teaching that prizes ecstatic sexual intimacy within marriage as God-given, regardless of procreation, Brownson (2013) also cites a number of Jesus' teachings which fervently view procreation and other marital and familial arrangements as obstacles to ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps somewhat shockingly for the postmodern reader, Jesus declares: "Verily I say unto you, there is no man that have left house, or wife or brethren, or parents or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come eternal life" (Luke 18: 29 - 30). Abstaining from heterosexual intercourse within marriage, not bearing children and renouncing one's family to spread the Good News, as a critical preamble to the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven, are all viewed as exemplary acts of discipleship. In addition to this austere and arguably all-consuming

ascetic, Jesus beseeches his followers to become spiritual eunuchs in readiness for that apocalyptic moment when the old order will pass away and a new Heaven and a new Earth begins: “And there are eunuchs which made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it” (Matthew 19: 12).

These seemingly oppositional texts relating to procreation, marriage and family are born out of the eschatological frame of reference inhabited by Jesus that was also espoused by the early Christian Church. The eschatological thrust of Jesus’s teaching predicted that: Jerusalem would fall (Luke 21: 20); from the time of Pentecost onwards, after his death, Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus would be constantly be with his Church (Mark 9: 1); and that at some point in the future, Jesus would return with the Parousia in all his glory. This is sometimes referred to as The Second Coming of Christ. From Jesus’ perspective these events would herald a new beginning in human history. This eschatological expectancy clearly shaped Jesus’ teaching about procreation, marriage and family ties. In an earnest and urgent sense these things understandably became extraneous in the mind of Jesus because of his belief that the consummation of the New Age was imminent. Henceforth, there was a radical shift in the ministry of Christ and the message of the early Church, moving away from “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1: 27-28) to “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28: 19) in readiness for the New Age.

What is clear, however, is that the Old Testament texts which have endorsed the inherent goodness of sexual ecstasy between a man and a woman within marriage, regardless of procreation discussed earlier, do not infer that sexual ecstasy could be a participatory means to having a mystical or transcendent experience of God. This idea, or possibility, emerged much later in The Middle Ages, becoming enshrined in the mystical teachings of Kabbalah. From this point on within this mystical version of Judaism, “sexual intercourse became a powerful spiritual act that enabled spouses to participate in the male and female aspects of God sustaining the cosmos” (Wade, 2004, p.5). While this signals a reunification of sexual and spiritual ecstasy within the mystical tradition of Judaism, what we have witnessed in our literature review thus far is that the God-given goodness of sexual ecstasy within heterosexual marriage gradually becomes eroded within Christianity and recast as sinful, needing restraint and acts of repentance.

Before addressing, as significant individual cases, the detrimental influence that both Paul the Apostle and St. Augustine of Hippo have exerted upon Western Christianity’s relationship with spiritual ecstasy, it will be expedient to first reflect upon those Biblical texts that appertain to same-sex relationships. This is particularly important given the current crisis within the C of E regarding same-sex unions. Here, I hope to shed important light on the historical roots that continue to fuel the bitter divide that constellates around the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, especially for those C of E clergy who identify as LGBT who prefer to express their sexuality through same-sex union(s).

2.1.2 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy within Same-Sex Relationships

As we begin to gather Biblical material on this issue it is important to note that such texts would not understand same-sex unions as a consequence of homoerotic desire in terms of identity (this is clearly a relatively modern concept), but rather as genital acts between persons of the same gender. Hence, Biblical passages tend to negatively pass judgement on same-sex genital acts, rather than on homoerotic desire and identity as a lifestyle choice. So, from the Levitical Holiness Code we read, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). The penalty for such transgressions is death: “And if a man lies with a mankind, as with womankind, both of them have committed abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood will be upon them” (Leviticus 20:13). In contrast to the Divine approval for husband and wife to enjoy the blessings of sexual ecstasy deliberated earlier, it would *appear* that same-sex ecstasy is strictly forbidden; let alone the engagement in same-sex genital acts.

Brownson (2003), shrewdly notes that this Levitical prohibition of a man sexually relating to a man, as with a woman, warranting death is not extended to include a woman sexually relating to a woman, as with a man. The word “abomination” therefore relates to the Israelites injunction not to emulate their nearby neighbours, by engaging in idolatry of foreign gods which invariably included same-sex acts between men and male prostitutes; women were never cast in these roles. What comes to mind here, is Feuerstein’s (1992) claim which was discussed earlier, that certain pagan traditions of worship involved same-sex unions between men. Therefore, the statutes of Leviticus

18:22 and 20:13 are not about the violation or transgression of gender roles, but about total monogamous allegiance to Yahweh and about male honour. Hence,

Levitical prohibitions should be read in light of assumptions regarding honor (sic) and shame that were shared throughout the ancient world. Male-male sex is thus linked with the behavior of alien nations, with idolatry and cultic prostitution, and with the degradation with distinctly male honour. (Brownson, 2002, p.272)

Similarly, Cornwall (2013) incisively critiques the Old Testament's inclusion of the word "abomination". In line with other scholars she makes important links with the context of the ancient Israelites and how "abomination" was tantamount to the Israelites' committing cultic defilement, such as worshipping foreign idols, that is, idolatry, of which same-sex practices were part and parcel.

Neill (2009) corroborates Brownson's (2002) and Cornwall's (2013) position by pointing out that Old Testament texts that condemn same-sex genital acts suggests that these behaviours were a part of the early Israelite or pre-exilic community. "The hostility that is associated with Hebrew scripture came relatively late in the history of the Israelites, appearing for the first time in the period after the return from Babylonian exile, in the late sixth-century B.C." (Neill, 2009, p.94). This subsequent shift from same-sex practices being seen as an acceptable part of the Israelite's worshipping Baal and Asherah alongside Yahweh, to one of hostility within the Hebrew Scriptures is a significant one. Eisler (1988), (cited in Neill 2009) adds to this chorus of criticism by attributing this shift to the patriarchal ideology of the Hebrew priests who wanted to overthrow the goddess-worshipping practises of the Canaanite people to underscore the exclusivity of Yahweh, by dis-identifying with same-sex erotic practices.

In a similar vein, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah told in Genesis 19 has been traditionally interpreted as an act of Divine punishment for same-sex genital acts. Many contemporary scholars, however, have taken issue with this traditional interpretation. Nelson (1978), amongst others, argues that the punishment wreaked by God against the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was a result of their inhospitality and the injustice shown toward the two visiting male angels, whom the residents threatened to rape. In a daring and refreshing queering-up of Genesis 19, Schneider (2001) recasts the angels as gay and the residents as homophobic bashers:

If we can plausibly re-read the story of Sodom (...) as Yhwh's rescue of the queers and a burning of the bashers [Carden, 2001], then we are reading a contemporary subject position funded by a very strong desire into the text perhaps more than we are reading some kind of mythic truth *out* of it. But the difference between these two positions may also be less relevant than the fruit such a reading can yield for our contemporary thoughts about a divine being whose founding tales could include such a deed. (2001, p.215 – italics in original; cited in Cornwall, 2011, pages, 151-152)

There is weighty evidence to be found elsewhere in the Old Testament that supports the claim that the purpose of the aim of the mythical story of Sodom and Gomorrah was to beseech the Israelites to hold fast to hospitality and justice by showing generosity to strangers (or the alien) and compassion for the widow and the orphan. So, in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel we read: "Behold this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom; pride, fullness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and her daughters, as thou hast done, thou and thy daughters" (16:49). Likewise, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah we find: "And Babylon, the glory of Kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans' pride, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" (13:19). Jesus himself understands the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to be about inhospitality. He makes this connection as he instructs his followers to go out into the cities and preach his message that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Jesus underscores the

sanctity of their mission by stating that whoever is inhospitable to them, then “it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city” (Luke 10:12).

Several centuries later, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah became associated with same-sex genital acts between men, and not about inhospitality and injustice. This marks a further shift in emphasis casting same-sex acts as inherently abominable and sinful. This shift in emphasis is encapsulated in two of the early Christian Letters. In the Second Epistle of Peter the author states: “And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, having made them an example unto those who shall live ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6). The author goes on: “But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of defilement, and despise dominion. Daring, self-willed, they tremble not to rail at indignities” (2 Peter 2:10). This demonization of same-sex acts between men based on, arguably a misinterpretation of the contextual dynamics at play in Genesis 19, has perhaps found no greater ferocity than in the Epistle of Jude: “Even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities about them, having in like manner with these given themselves over to fornication, and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 1:7). On this reading we begin to detect a growing enmity between sex and spirit, particularly as this might be expressed between two men or two women engaged in genital acts or engaging in the throes of sexual ecstasy with one another. While important scholarship has clearly abounded from a contemporary vantage point to re-contextualise several Biblical texts that condemn same-sex genital acts, affording a different exegesis, there are those who hold these texts as the inerrant word of God. In effect these texts continue to be used by the C of E thereby forbidding LGBT priests

from consummating their sexual identity, desire and longing within a same-sex relationship.

In comparison, Loader (2013) attempts a middle-ground approach to those theologians who have attempted a different re-reading of these aforesaid Biblical texts relating to same-sex acts. He maintains that Paul the Apostle, amongst others, would typically believe that as a Jew people who occupied “such passions and doing such things were acting contrary to their nature and to be condemned” (2013, p.146). However, he is quick to point out that there are many other examples of Biblical quotes that have been used to justify, for example, the oppression and exploitation of women and slaves. Equally, he argues, there is no reason not to follow the path of non-discrimination for those men and women who are erotically attracted and want to consummate this desire responsibly to someone of their own gender. While I respect Loader’s integrity in not wanting to be swayed by one side of the debate over the other regarding the relationship between sex and spirit, particularly as this relates to same-sex unions, I fear that he does not take enough stock of some of the searing contextual critiques provided by numerous scholars on this issue cited above. This helps me to appreciate why some queer theologians assert that “God’s being is indubitable but radically unknowable, and any theology that forgets this is undeniably straight, not queer” (Loughlin 2007, p.10, cited in Cornwall 2011, p.151). How, in other words, ‘straight’ perspectives can all too easily overlook complex contextual factors thereby unintentionally sanctioning hitherto heteronormative biases and interpretation.

As I reflect upon the aforementioned arguments about these particular texts as these relate to same-sex desire, and indeed the original blessing of sexual ecstasy between a married man and woman, it is perhaps timely to focus more intently upon the key protagonist of the early Christian Church, St. Paul the Apostle. Paul's eschatological expectancy, which was alluded to earlier on in our discussion, is pivotal to comprehending how he unwittingly contributed to the world-denying, body-denying and sex-denying outlook that continues to hold sway within Western Christianity. We now return to Paul in greater detail.

2.1.3 St. Paul the Apostle

Paul's unsuspecting contribution to a Christian message that continues to devalue "the body as a second-best home, a temporary stop-over" (Armstrong 1983, p.120) is attributed to his first Epistle to the Christian Community at Corinth. Deming's (2004) comprehensive analysis of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 7, reveals that he was contending with different factions that involved complex dynamics and pressing issues. "These include *being* married versus *becoming* celibate, *being* married to a non-Christian versus obtaining a divorce, *remaining* celibate versus *marrying* a Christian, and *marrying* a Christian versus *marrying* a non-Christian" (Deming 2004, p. 211 – italics in original). In essence, the key point that concerns us here, is that some of the Corinthians wanted to abstain from marriage and embrace a celibate life, while others wanted to abstain from sexual intercourse within marriage, from time to time, to deepen their ascetic allegiance to God through Jesus Christ; because like Paul, they were filled with eschatological expectancy about the impending return of Christ and hence their need for spiritual and moral guidance.

Paul writes to the Corinthians thus: “Now, concerning the things whereof ye wrote: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But, because of fornication, let each man have his own wife and each woman have her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7: 1-2). From this reading, Paul is *seemingly* not anti-sexual *per se*, and as a Jew he would of course be mindful of the God-given nature and delight of sexual ecstasy within marriage, embodied in Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs which we discussed earlier. Reflecting upon his own relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy he clearly states that he has chosen celibacy as his ascetic pathway as an Apostle of Christ: “Yet, I would that all men were even as myself. Howbeit, each man hath his own gift from God, one after his manner and another after that” (1 Corinthians 7:7). He goes on to instruct unmarried and widowed Corinthians to follow his example. Later he encourages those Christians who have sexual needs to marry rather than burn with passion: “But if they have no continency, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7:9). Here, Paul is encouraging those Corinthians who need to exercise and express their sexual needs to marry: to be unmarried and have sexual needs would put the earnest Corinthian Christian at risk of adultery.

Turning to those married Corinthian Christians who wished to withdraw from sexual relations, periodically, for the purpose of deepening their spiritual life with God through Christ, Paul is clear: “Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent for a season, that ye may give yourselves to prayer, and may be together again, that Satan not tempt you not because of your incontinency” (1 Corinthians 7:5). By linking Satan, sexual temptation and sin together, Paul carelessly casts sex as a dangerous stumbling block to the spiritual life, and despite his teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:7 noted

above, he thereby exalts celibacy as the ideal Christian ethic and ascetic. Indeed, “Paul’s linking of Satan with sexual temptation would provide future churchmen with a scriptural rationale for connecting marital intercourse with sin” (Obach 2009, p.13). We witnessed this growing anti-sexual temperament earlier on in this literature review when we explored St Augustine’s hermeneutical analysis of The Fall (Genesis 3). The lasting implications of Paul’s theological linkage of Satan, sexual temptation and sin has been to champion spiritual celibacy as the Christian ideal, with sex within marriage becoming a necessity for procreation. Deming passionately critiques this misreading by tracing and appreciating the cultural context of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, concluding that:

Paul assesses the value of marriage and celibacy with regard to prevailing circumstances. For him it is not a matter of choosing a higher or lower standard of morality, but of forestalling important decisions in life on the basis of expectancy. (2004, p.219)

Clearly, Paul is confronted with the difficult task of trying to appease different divisions within the Corinthian Christian community regarding sexual expression within marriage, celibacy and moments of abstinence from sexual intercourse within marriage to attend to spiritual matters; notwithstanding the eschatological urgency mentioned earlier.

Paul’s unintentional contribution to the current crisis about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy encapsulated in 1 Corinthians 7, has been further compounded based on his exhortation in his Letter to the Galatians: “But I say, walk by the Spirit and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5: 16). The problematic word that has been wrongly misinterpreted relates to the Greek word

“*sarx*” which has been translated into the word “flesh”. The Christian Church regrettably understands Paul’s reference to flesh as condemning sexual pleasure, even within marriage. At this point, Obach’s following comments add poignant resonance to our discussion:

Paul’s idea of “flesh” (*sarx*) had so many overlapping meanings that Christian leaders were able to project anti-sexual biases into Paul’s use of the word. Thus, many churchmen would interpret Paul’s reference to “flesh” as if he were condemning sexual pleasure, even in marital intercourse. (2009, p.13)

Similarly, Armstrong protests against Christianity’s misinterpretation of “*sarx*” to equate with sexual pleasure and then this being designated with the value judgement of sinfulness. When Paul writes about Spirit (*pneuma*) and flesh (*sarx*), Armstrong asserts, he did not mean to imply a dualistic hierarchy but rather the need for “man’s unredeemed body/soul [to] become redeemed body/soul (*pneuma*)” (1983, p.119). Likewise, Reuther (1974) asserts that any ideas that sexual abstinence would lead to a heightened state of holiness would be, as a Jew, alien to Paul’s thinking.

Loader (2013) agrees with these critical rebuffs, highlighting how Paul equates the “works of the flesh” to numerous other sinful actions. In Galatians 5: 20-22 he lists fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, heresies, envying’s, drunkenness and revelling’s. However, Loader (2013) does concede that at the top of Paul’s list is sexual wrongdoing. On this note Obach also notes the manifold meanings that the Greek word “*sarx*” (flesh) holds, such as the physical body, the self, flesh, even our humanity, noting that rarely does this term “denote something sexual” (2009, p.13).

Returning once again to same-sex erotic desire and spiritual ecstasy, Paul's teaching states that for men and women to engage in same-sex genital acts would be tantamount to idolatry. Hence:

For this cause God gave them up unto vile passions: for their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise, also the men leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another, men with men working unseemliness and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was due". (Romans 1: 26-27)

To commit idolatry in this way would forbid entry into the Kingdom of Heaven: "Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers themselves with men" (1 Corinthians 6:9). In addition to being forbidden to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, those men and women who commit such same-sex acts enjoying sexual ecstasy together are breaching the law of God. So, we read: "For fornicators, for abusers of themselves with men, for men-stealers, for liars, for false swearers, and if there be any other thing contrary to the sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:10).

Reflecting upon Romans 1:26-27, which has often been used to theologically proscribe against lesbianism, Cornwall (2013) wonders whether the text might be referring to non-procreative sex i.e. men and women engaging in anal intercourse. I think this is a fascinating but dubious hermeneutical stance given the emphatic instruction laid out in Romans 1:26-27 as this relates to women with women and men with men. And yet the condemnation may indeed be linked to *not* procreating as a result of such behavior, rather than same-sex acts between men and between women, *per se*. A critical re-reading of 1 Corinthians 6:9 offered by Martin (1994) has an incisive edge to it as he

charts how the Greek words *arsenokoites* and *malakoi* have changed in their meaning over time. So, for example, *arsenokoites* has ranged from ‘sodomites’, ‘lecherers’, ‘liars with mankind’, ‘sexual perverts’, ‘homosexual offenders’, ‘homosexual perverts’ to ‘male homosexuals’. Likewise, *malakoi* has covered a range of definitions including, ‘male prostitutes’, ‘weaklings’ and ‘effeminates’. Interestingly, he also notes that at one time until the Reformation *malakoi* seemed to denote ‘masturbators’. His critical exegesis concludes “that as prejudices changed, so have translations of the Bible” (Martin 1994, p.86 cited in Cornwall 2013, p.126). Such interpretative problems urge Brownson to deliberate that texts like these cannot be used “to justify the condemnation of consensual, committed, and loving same-sex unions today” (2002, p.43).

While these are vital re-readings of Pauline theology it nevertheless appears that Paul was a troubled man regarding his embodied nature as both *sarx* and *pneuma*; and his anxiety has undoubtedly left an indelible impression on subsequent Christian theology and sexual ethics, up to and including the present time. This leads Spong (1988) to wonder whether Paul’s conflicted relationship between his sexuality and spirituality possibly stemmed from his repressed homoerotic desires which he elusively described “as a thorn in his flesh” (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10). This pondering is not privy to scholarly confirmation or indeed, for that matter, repudiation but suffice it to note that such a claim is a fascinating piece of conjecture given the focus of this research study.

As a result of Paul’s challenge to meet the diverse and opposing needs of the Corinthian Church regarding their relationship between “*sarx*” and “*pneuma*”,

alongside his own inner battles between his sexual and spiritual impulses: on this issue:

Later Christians used Paul as a basis for their own neuroses of celibacy, and the mistake is easy to understand. There is in Paul's rejection of the world and his slighting of the body a sense of isolation, the isolation of an exile who is not at home in his body. (Armstrong, 1983, p.121)

St. Augustine, who is regarded as that great Paulinist of the Christian Church, also encapsulates this deep sense of isolation and alienation from The City of God, rendering this world as a pale and inferior realm compared to the heavenly world to come. This, coupled with his adventurous love-life and arguably his subsequent neurosis following his conversion to Christianity, has significantly added to the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy being forced further apart into a dualistic and antagonistic one. I now turn to St. Augustine of Hippo as our second significant key figure in Christendom to contribute to sexual ecstasy becoming associated with sin and shame, which in turn elevates spiritual ecstasy as the highest Christian ideal.

2.1.4 St. Augustine of Hippo

Before his conversion to Christianity in 384 A.D, Augustine was steeped in the religion of Manicheanism which propagated a dualistic cosmology, asserting that in the beginning light (good) and darkness (evil) were split into opposing energies. Consequently, spirit (light) was heralded as good, while the material world, including the body (evil) were intrinsically bad. He would later attack the religion he had practiced after his conversion in Milan and integrate Platonic philosophical thought

that was characteristic of the Christianity of the day, in order to fathom “the depths of the union of God and the human soul” (Obach, 2009, p.29).

Prior to his conversion, Augustine had several passionate relationships. In his youth he had a sexual, erotic relationship with a young male friend, describing their relationship as two bodies with one soul; and upon learning that his young friend had unexpectedly died he felt torn in half - so intense was his grief and loss (Neill, 2009, p.224). Augustine then went on to have a sexual relationship with a woman for twelve years until his mother arranged a marriage partner for him. He sent his first lover away. Augustine would have to wait a further two years to consummate the relationship with this lover that he sent away due to her underage status; so, in the meantime he had a mistress. Instead of marrying the young woman he was betrothed to, he converted to Christianity and became a monk dedicating his life to writing and studying.

In his *Confessions* he perceives himself to be a slave to lust. It would appear that Augustine’s sexual anxieties, coupled with the residues of his hitherto rejected Manicheanism roots about the dualities of good and evil (spirit and matter), along with his exposure to Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, convince him that “the purity of the soul (...) was polluted by the evil of sexual desire” (Augustine, cited in Neill, 2009, p.212). As a result of Augustine’s sexual and spiritual anxiety about the relationship between his sexual and spiritual impulses, Obach audaciously wards him with the title: “The Father of Pelvic Anxiety” (2009, p.40). In fact, Augustine was so sexually and spiritually confused, and clearly at war within himself on this front, that he referred to

the dangers of sexual desire as “concupiscence”. Here, he was making a clear point about the wayward and sinful dangers that Cupid could wreak upon the unsuspecting Christian. Obach insists, however, that while Augustine thought of himself as being “in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust” (Augustine, cited in Obach, 2009, p.29) between the ages of 17 and 20, his sexual experimentations should not be viewed as promiscuous but a healthy psychosexual stage of development; and yet in the interests of multiple truths side by side, he also knew the possessive and all-consuming nature of unbridled lust from his direct experiences. This prompts Feuerstein to assert:

St Augustine was right when he described lust as a form of craving and psychic disturbance. Its supposed sinfulness is rooted in the fact that lust is exploitative: Rather than leading to genuine emotional and spiritual union, it reinforces a person’s sense of self-dividedness and separateness. Under the sway of lust, orgasm becomes a goal that is pursued with singular drivenness: thus, the body’s erotic force is dissipated. (1992, p.145)

In a similar manner, Cornwall, wants to redeem Augustine’s message on this note, acknowledging that all too often he has become mocked and vilified for his supplication to married Christians to forgo lustful passion when engaging in sexual intercourse. She believes that at the heart of Augustine’s struggle is the exacting question that should concern current Christian theologians, ethicists and Christians alike, which is to consider “how can humans conduct their sexual lives mindfully and thoughtfully, always conscious of how their sexual actions promote love for God, other people and themselves?” (Cornwall, 2013, p.37).

Wilber (2000) likewise offers us a balanced appraisal of Augustine's legacy. In Augustine's writing he detects what he terms the ascending God and descending God. The latter involves the primacy of introspection, a meditative awareness about the intimacy and immediacy of the presence of God in all things. The former denotes God as other-worldly and demands of the believer total absorption into God. Soteriology, or salvation in this regard, cannot be experienced in this life but in the world to come. With the descending God the self-object dualism is overcome. With the ascending God this world, in line with Armstrong's (1983) insightful comments about Paul's theological predicament, becomes a place of isolation and exile from God for Augustine. In a real sense, Augustine eventually chooses between the descending God and the ascending God. His choice of the latter conveys his growing inability to hold the immanence or nearness and transcendence or un-knowableness of God in a creative tension. Tellingly, his inability to commune only with God and not the world is indicative of his *Confessions* which he directs "to God and not the world which would actually read them" (Armstrong, 1983, p.128). Returning to Wilber's appraisal of Augustine's legacy, Wilber concludes:

For all of Augustine's undoubted brilliance – for all that, he cannot shake his dualistic dogma that this world is merely a preparation for the next world; he is locked into the myth of the *future* resurrection of the body [resulting in] (...) no true divinization of (...) this body, or of this life. (2000, p.372 – italics in original)

Consequently, Augustine's contribution to Christianity completely severed the relationship between spiritual and sexual ecstasy, along with Pauline theology and particular Biblical texts, casting sex as the contaminator of the spiritual life. This world-denying, body-denying and sex-denying outlook was not exclusively communicated

by Augustine, which invariably culminated in women, in particular, being castigated and blamed for such lustful longings. Armstrong reminds us that:

Augustine said [women] were full of excrement. When St. Bernard's sister went to visit him at Clairvaux wearing a new dress, Bernard flew into a rage and called her a filthy whore. One can merely wonder at the repressed souls of these Christian celibates, for whom women could only be temptation. (1983, p.150)

Another example of a repressed soul who was unable to reconcile his sexual and spiritual nature was Origen. After reflecting upon the Song of Songs 2:5 he writes:

If there is anyone who has been pierced with a lovable spear of [Christ's] knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for him by day and night, can speak but naught of him, would hear of naught but him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for him alone – if such there be, that soul then says in truth: "I have been wounded by love". (Origen cited in Carr, 2003, p. 142)

Origen's commentary is undoubtedly based upon his own intense experience of spiritual ecstasy. His all-consuming love and longing for Christ are both beautiful and wounding. Such an intense preoccupation with spiritual desire, would presumably put him into conflict with his own sexual desire; and this might in part account for the fact that Origen despised his own sexuality so much that he castrated himself.

We now move to the medieval period when we witness a resurgence of the erotic in the form of the Christian mystics, but as we shall see this is far from a straightforward re-integration of the erotic with the religious.

2.1.5 The Christian Mystics and the Return of the Erotic

Christian hagiography, for those who embraced sexual abstinence and followed the path of celibacy, was about emulating Christ's life here on earth as a religious monk or nun. It is perhaps hard to comprehend how the Christian mystics could be allowed to use erotic language to express their exquisite bliss after encountering God when Christians were "forbidden to express their sexual desires and thus burdened by extreme sexual guilt and shame" (Feuerstein, 1992, p113). Such was the contextual milieu of the medieval period. Nevertheless, the Christian mystics did use this language freely. As we will discover, while this was a way of expressing Divine love, it remains important for our purposes to consider how these moments of sexualised ecstatic union with the God might serve our current understanding about this distinctive relationship.

In reality moments of spiritual ecstasy that warranted ecstatic, sexual language was few and far between for many of the Christian mystics. Consequently, they suffered long periods of doubts and depression – the dark night of the soul – when these moments of ecstatic union fleetingly were given by God's good grace and quickly evaporated like the morning mist. Wilber comments that "the Dark Night occurs in that period *after* one has tasted [Divine Union] but before one has established it, for one has now seen paradise . . . and seen it fade. The torment is now agonizing" (2000, p.304 – italics in original). Nevertheless, during the medieval period the Christian mystics would use subtle sexual imagery, in the case of St John of the Cross, or unashamed and explicit sexual language, in the case of Theresa of Avila, as a literary device to communicate the Divine ecstasy through union with God. Indeed, sex and

spirit appear as passionate partners in many of the writings from the Christian mystics. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux allegorically portrayed the intimacy of divine love through the erotic relationship between bridegroom (God) and bride (soul) (Sermon 83: 4-6) (<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com>). Likewise, Theresa of Avila testifies to orgasmic moans of pain and pleasure as she encounters the illumination of the Divine:

Beside me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them (...) but it was our Lord's will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire. They must be of the kind called cherubim, but they do not tell me their names. In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged in to my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it – even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks I am lying, I pray God, in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it. (St. Theresa of Avila, cited in Cohen, 1957, p.210)

St. Theresa was physically beautiful and very attractive to men, both lay and monastic, and exhibited a lively intelligence for all things Godly. Haule (2010) notes that at the age of forty, having followed the religious life as a nun from the age of twenty-three. St. Theresa denounced her passion-filled but chaste devotion to her confessors' because this had left her with tormented guilt and shame.

The agent of the change was her discovery of Augustine's *Confessions*, just recently translated into Spanish. It introduced her to a love of God which transcended and deepened the love that she had already known with men in holy orders. (Haule, 2010, p.113)

This may account, in some sense, for her exquisite use of her hitherto erotic feelings for her confessors which she utilised to explain her subtle union with God. This can

lead to the causal level of spiritual experience where in the “state of formless and silent awareness, one does not see the Godhead, for one is the Godhead, and knows it from within, self-felt, and not from without, as an object” (Wilber, 2000, p.312). To my mind, St. Theresa’s testimony blatantly underscores the embodied and immanent experience of the Divine, in sharp contrast to the body-denying sentiment embedded in Augustine’s spiritual writing.

St. John of the Cross, (also known as San Juan de la Cruz) a fellow Christian mystic also underscores the immediate and embodied experience of the Divine, but with less erotic vigour. Thompson (2002) shrewdly remarks that rarely has such a small body of mystical writing captured the imagination of scholars and Christians alike than St. John of the Cross’ erotic poetry entitled *Dark Night*.

On a dark night, Kindled in love and yearning – oh
happy chance! –
I went forth without being observed, My house being now at
Rest.

In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised – oh,
happy chance! –
In darkness and concealment, My house being now at rest.

In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, saved that which
burned in my heart.

This light guided me More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me –
A place where none appeared.

Oh night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the
dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved and lover, Lover transformed in
the Beloved!

Upon my flowery breast, Kept wholly for himself alone,

There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him, And the fanning of
the cedars made a breeze.
The breeze blew from the turret As I parted his locks;
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck And caused all my
senses to be suspended.

I remained lost in oblivion: My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned myself, Leaving my cares forgotten
among the lilies.
(St John of the Cross, cited in Peers, 1959, p. 17)

The poem describes a woman leaving her house in the danger of darkness in pursuit of her Beloved; and yet she is guided by the light of longing that burns in her heart that leads her safely to her destination. In keeping with other medieval Christian Mystics several motifs are employed that resonate with the Song of Songs, which we referred to earlier on in our discussion. In keeping with the Song of Songs we do not witness the lovers' consummating their sexual desire but we do encounter them in a post-coital embrace. Other motifs are employed such as light and darkness reminiscent of John's Gospel: "And the light shineth in the darkness: and the darkness apprehended it not" (John 1:5).

While this text incorporates the erotic love poetry of its time, there is embedded within its lines a deep sense of the sacred, the divine. It is interesting to note that while no mention of religious meaning is imparted within the text, like the Song of Songs, "read, however mistakenly, as a poem of erotic love, it succeeds brilliantly. It speaks of the mystery, wonder, tenderness and intimacy of a truly mutual relationship: it reveals sexual love as discovery, encounter, transformation, fulfilment" (Thompson, 2002, p.85). The author's words "however mistakenly", reconnects with Neill's (2009) earlier counsel not to embroider the sexual or religious sensibilities of the current age onto

texts from a different time, context and worldview. In considering St. John of the Cross' *seemingly* homoerotic overtures Neill reminds us that we are reviewing the mystical writings of:

A 17th-century Spanish monk, a member of a religion that viewed sexuality as antithetical to spirituality, that condemned any sexual activity outside of marriage, and in a time when men were still being burned at the stake for homosexual acts. (2009, p.91).

A critical point here is that the Christian soul would be referred to as feminine within the cultural time frame of 17th-century Spain. Hence, the male Beloved (God) and the feminine lover (soul) penetrate each other resulting in transformation. That said, from our current perspective it feels vital to be curious about the Beloved disciple, who is not named, but presumed to be St John the Evangelist, who rests on Jesus' chest. Hence, we read: "There was at table reclining in Jesus bosom, one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). This Biblical motif may have also had some resonance with St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night*. It will be interesting to note whether the contemporary listener (participant) will apprehend this as a Spanish mystical account between the soul and God or identify with it from a homoerotic standpoint. With the return of the erotic with the Christian mystics, while used in the service of explicating the Divine and rapturous union with God, we perhaps get a glimpse of the erotic impulse longing to be reunited with the spiritual impulse, despite the austere and repressive milieu of medieval Christianity. There are other signs attesting to a return of the erotic impulse to the spiritual impulse which I now consider.

2.1.6 Further Signs of the Return of the Erotic

In the early sixteenth-century the Reformation created a worldwide schism of the Universal and Apostolic Church giving rise to the C of E as it severed itself from what would come to be known as the Roman Catholic Church. As an act of Counter-Reformation, The Council of Trent met to reaffirm the Catholic faith. Interestingly, Obach noted that after almost fifteen-hundred years of the Church driving a “wedge between physical sex and spiritual love”, The Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566) finally approved of marriage as a source of “mutual aid” (2009, p.215). This subtle shift gradually snowballed and eventually staved off, to some extent, Augustine's ‘pelvic anxiety’ that was so endemic to Church teaching. Hence, The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) proclaimed that marital sex was in its own right “that mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful and thankful will” (Obach, 2009, p.171). Obach goes on to note that earlier on in 1930 the C of E had released a very similar message emphasizing that “the sexual instinct is a holy thing implanted by God [within] married love” (2009, p.131). Clearly, momentum has gathered to celebrate sexual ecstasy within marriage that was originally typified in Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs, which brings further consilience between these two impulses.

While significant advances have taken place to re-establish the God-given nature of sexual ecstasy within marriage regardless of procreation, this has also galvanised the C of E's “determination to maintain that heterosexual relationships are at the heart of the divine plan [legitimising] permission to discriminate in a way that in secular situations is now illegal” (Maxwell, 2013, p.31). As a result, LGBT clergy who wish to consummate their sexual desire in a same-sex union are called instead to a life of

sexual abstinence and ascetic celibacy (even if they are in a civil partnership); that is, if they wish to hold their C of E office as a Clerk in Holy Orders (Priest) (House of Bishops, 2013, para. 373). Just as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual clergy are expected to sacrifice their sexual ecstasy, in a similar fashion Christian trans-men and trans-women's experiences have also been negated and silenced, habitually cast in negative terms. It is refreshing to note that "the T in LGBT [is] no longer simply a letter, or an afterthought: trans Christian people [have] begun to speak for themselves in Church settings" (Beardsley and O'Brien, 2016, p.3).

Without question, there are dominant voices within Christian theology that continue to cast sexuality into the shadows of human experience as a dangerous stumbling block to the spiritual life, particularly non-heterosexual sexualities. Such a viewpoint promotes "a dualistic understanding of the world, cleaving the individual into body and soul, and demanding a choice between sexuality and spirituality" (Deming, 2005, p. 219). Others have commented that with the culmination of secularisation "all vital experiences – whether sex or eating, work or play – have been desacralized [which] means that all these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance" (Eliade, 1959, p. 168). In the meantime, the House of Bishops refuses to embrace a golden opportunity to re-sexualise theology, which has always been there, and thereby re-sacralise sexuality; so that we might have "a new level of consciousness about the ways in which our sexuality, for good or ill, has shaped our expressions of faith" (Nelson, 1978, p.236).

In more recent times, Carr (2003) has embraced this new level of consciousness by drawing our attention to the sensual accent deeply embedded within the biblical texts that have been marginalised over the centuries. Here, he takes a challenging, sexually inclusive and celebratory stance concluding that the broader Bible is a “call to life of erotic passion: passion for others, passion for God, passion for the earth [and] when the Bible is used to shut down sexuality (or certain sexualities), spirituality is shut down as well” (ibid, p.3). Somewhat remarkably, in sharp contrast to Carr’s viewpoint, Stuart embraces the Church’s doctrine about the centrality of the saving grace of the sacrament of baptism, arguing that:

In the end gay is not good, straight is not good but God alone, and redemption does not come through gender or sexuality [and] as my body lies in its casket before the altar my hope will not lie in my sexual orientation or my gender but my baptism. (2003, p.114)

This theological position to my mind dangerously teeters towards a world-denying, body-denying and sex-denying outlook that has so dominated Western Christianity. In so doing it downplays the centrality of the Christian doctrine of God becoming *flesh* in Christ (Gospel of John 1: 14); the Church as the *Body* of Christ (1 Corinthians 12: 27); the consecration of the bread and wine as the *Body and Blood* of Jesus Christ (John 6: 53); and finally, Christ's relationship with His Church being compared to that of *bridegroom and bride* (Ephesians 5: 25). Nevertheless, I can appreciate Stuart’s creative manoeuvre in making all sexualities and gender equal as a way of trying to resolve the current impasse regarding the C of E’s stance on sexual and spiritual ecstasy for LGBT clergy, and laity. Furthermore, MacKnee’s (2007) research vigorously contradicts Stuart’s position as he explores the relationship between spirituality and sexuality for Christian laity. He concludes that “Christian co-researchers who encountered profound sexual and spiritual (...) closeness with God [reconciled

their] dualism between [their] body and spirit, humanity and nature, and man and woman' (1997, p.190).

It would appear that Stuart's position is in line with what Pannenberg (1968) critically terms, a theology "from above". From this perspective Jesus is, *a priori*, revealed as God and consequently his teaching, and that of other Biblical texts become unquestionable acts of confession and dogma. Gunton (1983) is concerned that a theology "from below" relies heavily on lived-experience in order to arrive at statements of faith or doctrine, *a posteriori*, rendering Jesus a divinised man. My own position is that a dialogue between theologies "from above" and "from below" is vital if the C of E is going to move forwards regarding the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. This would also chime with the Anglican virtues of Bible, tradition, reason and *experience*, referred to in the Introductory Chapter, when considering matters of Christian faith and human sexuality (Alker, 2015). Clearly, its current insistence on sexual abstinence and ascetic celibacy for LGBT clergy who are attracted to same-sex partners, and the reluctance to fully engage and listen to trans-peoples' experiences per se, exposes a lopsided persistence to approach these matters with a theology "from above".

Coakley (2013) understands sexual desire as being inextricably and irrefutably linked to desire for God. She achieves this by going beyond the *perceived* patriarchal language and re-envisioning the Trinity as a radical relationship of reciprocal equality that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From her perspective Christians are called to embody this relational paradigm in their dealings with each other and on

matters of theology and spirituality and sexuality and gender. From my perspective, this is a bold and timely invitation to the C of E to cease from exclusively dealing with issues of human sexuality “from above”. Coakley’s offering is designed to get beyond the destructive impasse in which the C of E finds itself on these matters.

Equally, Song offers his theological perspective with the same intent. He advocates a “covenant partnership [which] is rooted in the eschatological character of the time we indwell, that is, the time when in Christ the ultimate destiny of the creation has been revealed, but when it has yet to be fulfilled” (2014, 0.xi). What he is suggesting here is a covenant partnership sanctioned by the C of E for same-sex, transsexuals, intersex and opposite-sex relationships as a midway point between civil partnership and the sacrament of marriage. The deciding factor for sanctioning this category “is not between heterosexual and homosexual relationships, but between procreative and non-procreative couples” (ibid, 2014, p. xi). While I am sure this is an earnest attempt to find the middle-way in the current crisis about sexuality, spirituality and gender it has unmistakable remnants of Paul the Apostle’s eschatological compromises. Furthermore, there appears to be a manifest disregard for the continuity of the God-given nature of sexual ecstasy within marriage with no mention of procreation epitomised in Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs. At this point I am mindful of Nietzsche’s searing critique:

From the very first, Christianity spelled life loathing itself, and that loathing was simply disguised, tricked out, with notions of an “other” and “better” life. A hatred of the “world”, a curse on the affective urges, a fear of beauty and sensuality, a transcendence rigged up to slander mortal existence, a yearning for extinction, cessation of all effort until the great “Sabbath” of “Sabbaths” (1872/1967, p.11).

While Neill (2009) has warned about the dangers of projecting the sexual or religious sensibilities of the current age onto texts from a different historical worldview, others have called for this to be exercised consciously in the service of healing the rift between sexual and spiritual ecstasy that continues to dominate the Christian landscape, especially as this relates to non-heterosexual sexualities. Brownson, eloquently states that:

Human love and desire, including sexual desire (if we consider the long tradition of metaphorical and allegorical readings of the Song of Songs), always points beyond itself. The drama of loving and being loved, desiring and being desired, is an echo and foretaste of the deeper drama in which our hearts find their deepest home in communion with God, the fountain and source of all love, who himself is love (1 John 4:8). (2013, p. 165)

Here, Brownson offers a much-needed theological rapprochement between a sexual ecstasy and spiritual ecstasy with each being rooted in the other. On this important note while reflecting upon St John of the Cross' erotically imbued spiritual poetry, Thompson declares that:

Western thought has come to separate sexuality and spirituality in a way that tends to cheapen the first and disembody the second. Hence interpreting San Juan's mystical poetry has so often become a matter of choosing between an erotic and a religious reading. But if one looks for conjunctions, not discontinuities, a very different reading emerges, in which both can be affirmed. In terms of erotic reading, embodied in his poetry and its world of mutual self-giving, tenderness, intimacy and joy, are important insights into the nature of human love: its beauty, sensitivity and mystery opposed to possessiveness, abuse and self-gratification. In its own way, therefore, it affirms the highest ideals of Christian teaching on human sexuality. But is also a metaphor for human spiritual love, and the two are and must be connected because no human being can live a spiritual life without a body. (2002, p.279)

In a similar vein, Bourgeault (2010) exposes and explores a number of the myths that continue to haunt Western Christendom when it comes to the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. In particular, she addresses three myths: (1) that celibacy

is the preferred way of giving oneself to God; (2) that love of God and love of another human being will divide the heart; and (3) that human love is inherently different from Divine love. By exploding these myths Bourgeault reunites love with passion and self-emptying (*kenosis*). She declares:

I have depicted it in a simple formula $A=E \times K$, where A is *agape* (transfigured love), E is *eros* (passion) and K is *kenosis*. According to this particular alchemy of transformation, the unitive point (or “singleness”) is attained not through renunciation and sexual abstinence but rather through a willing surrender of attachment to those thing(s) one holds most precious. (ibid, pp.214-215)

Based on Thompson and Bourgeault’s passionate and thoughtful insights about the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and that of other ‘voices’ discussed in this subsection, there is an urgent need for these two primary ways of being in the world to be reunited.

2.1.7 Summary

Thus far, our theological literature review has demonstrated how sexual ecstasy within marriage in the Jewish world was originally viewed as God-given and a continuous blessing outside of the remit of procreation. Tribal needs for safety and security against warring nations made it expedient for procreation to become the goal of sexual intercourse. In time, within early Christianity sexual ecstasy within marriage become a distraction, along with childbearing and familial ties as a result of Jesus’ eschatological vision. St. Paul the Apostle unsuspectingly added to this unrealised anti-sexual kernel that was embedded in some, but not all, of Jesus’s teaching. Paul was so convinced about this eschatological urgency that he instructed the Corinthians to marry as a way of satisfying their carnal lusts; imploring unmarried and widowed Christians to exercise

sexual abstinence and ascetic celibacy in preparation for Jesus' imminent return. St. Augustine of Hippo's shame, regret and anxiety about his sexual adventures add to the enmity between sexual and spiritual impulses. Cumulatively, from the Old Testament onwards biblical texts have been de-contextualised by Christianity and used to condemn same-sex genital acts as ungodly *per se*; even though many scholars have questioned this hermeneutic bias in this respect. The Christian mystics heralded the beginnings of sexual ecstasy being understood as part and parcel of spiritual ecstasy to some extent, with more contemporary theologians reuniting this relationship more clearly for our current age. While the C of E continues to wrestle with the challenge to integrate sexual and spiritual ecstasy, voices from the theological margins have grown in volume demanding a healthier appreciation as to how these aspects of human experience are two sides of the same coin, and that both can inform our psychological growth and spiritual development. We now turn to the psychological understandings about the distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy with this recursive literature review.

2.2 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: Psychological Perspectives

In this subsection on the psychological perspectives about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, we find that by the end of the 19th-Century these two primary impulses have become predominantly separated in the Western mind. Sexual ecstasy on the other hand is initially viewed as both inherently good and essential to good psychological well-being. However, in some quarters this is replaced with the belief that sexual ecstasy is potentially destructive and something to be psychically controlled and sublimated. In a similar vein to our theological review, heterosexual sex is privileged and prized above non-heterosexual expressions; with the latter becoming

pathologized during the 19th-century. However, lone voices appear within this psychological discourse that diverge from this dominant narrative, and over time further voices emerge gaining greater velocity, resulting in salient publications and research that reveal the unitary and generative nature that the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy can potentially exert.

2.2.1 The Ascendancy of the Sexual Impulse: Sigmund Freud

We now turn to the end of the 19th-century and the first half of the 20th-century, to discover that Sigmund Freud, the founding Father of Psychoanalysis, was influenced by the hitherto growing process of de-sacralising sexual ecstasy. In addition, after initially viewing the sexual impulse as something needing to be liberated from the forces of repression to aid physiological catharsis and therefore, promote psychological well-being, he re-casts this instinctual drive as a dangerous threat to the social stability of civilisation. Accordingly, the sexual impulse needed to be analysed, brought into conscious awareness and tamed. As we consider these seismic shifts about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, it is important to recall that Freud was a product of The Industrial Revolution and as such he championed reason and modern science - those two great 'gods' of The Enlightenment. From this scientific standpoint he declared that "the sacred" (Eliade, 1957, p.10) core of sexuality, once revered during the pre-modern era, was spent and exhausted. On this point Freud (1910/1957) boldly claims that "[i]n the course of cultural development so much of the divine and sacred was ultimately extracted from sexuality that the exhausted remnant fell into contempt" (p.97). Furthermore, the religious impulse was nothing more than a parental-complex, an unconscious infantile wish to be protected

by a benign, supernatural power that was reminiscent of childhood desire. In this regard he claimed that:

Psycho-analysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father, and (...) we recognise that the roots of the need for religion are in the parental-complex; the almighty and just God, and kindly Nature, appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother, or rather as revivals and restorations of the young child's ideas of them. (1910/1957, p.123).

Ultimately for Freud, God, religion and the spirit were consigned to the realm of illusion (Freud, 1927/1961) and sexuality, once 'married' to the sacred, became the cornerstone, along with aggression, for his psychoanalysis. Spezzano and Gargiulo (1996) have taken issue with Freud's reductive critique about the role of the religious impulse. From a Relational Psychoanalytic perspective, they note that phenomenologically, and indeed qualitatively, "[w]hat God and the unconscious have in common is their paradoxical combining of meaning and unknowability" (p. xiii). As well as acknowledging the shadow side of organised religion, Spezzano and Gargiulo are holding a positive appreciation that spiritual experiences can provide, not only for individual functioning but for human psychological well-being. In this way they hold the positive and negative aspects of religion which are aptly communicated when they argue that:

Ever since Freud put religion on the couch in "The Future of an Illusion," there has been an uneasy peace, with occasional skirmishes, between these two great disciplines of subjectivity. Freud, in his bold manner, found projection, fear and denial to be the wellspring of religion's domination over man. So, convinced was he of having uncovered its power that he was unable to look beyond religion's possible abuses to its potential role in human subjectivity. (ibid)

Nonetheless, as the founding Father of Psychoanalysis, Freud effectively 'dethrones' God and extracts the 'sacred' from the sexual, offering in its place his representation of the psyche which he mapped as Id, Ego and Superego. Within his structural model he identified sex and aggression or "*Eros and the destructive instinct*" (Freud 1940/1964, p.148 – italics in original) as the essence of our psychological nature which reside within the Id. So, in essence, for Freud, while human-beings physically walked on two feet, psychologically we walked on all fours like the animal kingdom. Consequently, our sexual and aggressive instincts, sometimes referred to the life and death instinct or Eros and Thanatos, needed to be made conscious and disciplined. Hence, his succinct quote to capture his psychoanalytic intent: "Where Id was, Ego shall be" (1932/1964, p.80).

Essentially, Freud casts the psyche as a battleground: the chaotic and destructive impulses of the Id and the moralistic and punitive messages of the Superego are at war, leaving the Ego caught up in the middle of this conflict (TePaske, 2008). Freudian psychoanalysis therefore interprets neurosis as an unresolved sexual and aggressive conflict deeply embedded in the patient's early psychosexual stages of development that initially becomes constellated as the Oedipus complex, approximately around the age of four years old. If this desire of the human infant to psychologically kill-off one parent in order to possess the remaining parent is not ameliorated by the parents with firm but loving responses, then this unresolved complex will become unconsciously replayed in destructive and devastating ways in later adulthood. In addition, the innate trajectory towards heterosexual object choice would be thwarted leading to a homosexual object choice.

In respect of homosexual object-choice versus a heterosexual object-choice, Freud (1901-05/1953) postulated that at the genital stage of puberty the teenager becomes interested in shared sexual fantasies with the opposite sex. This then becomes the cornerstone of later adult sexual relations. For Freud a heterosexual orientation is the mark of a successful outcome of psychosexual development, while homosexuality is a travesty of this psychosexual trajectory. He unambiguously states:

We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as their model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed 'narcissistic'. In this observation we have the strongest of the reasons which have led us to adopt the hypothesis of narcissism. (1914/1957, p.88 – italics in original)

As an adherent of Classical Psychoanalysis, Kahn extols Freud for “amazingly having little homophobia” in his writing (2002, p.76). Linking same-sex desire and the consummation of that desire with narcissism, to my mind, is far from devoid of homophobia nor indeed the propensity of psychology to pathologize non-heterosexual object-choice. Indeed, psychology’s propensity to pathologize non-heterosexual sexualities has been well attested to, with Struzzo noting how, in his professional experience, “gays and lesbians tend to be over-diagnosed as having paranoid, narcissistic, and borderline personality disorders, and tend to be considered more seriously disturbed than they are” (1989, p.198). In the final analysis the sexual impulse for Freud becomes about the primacy of heterosexuality. On this note, Nelson wonders whether the Church has incorporated Freud’s somewhat cynical and perilous view of the role of human sexuality. This over-identification would make sense given that sex is castigated by the Church as original sin. Nelson contends that:

[T]he view that the repression of sexuality is at the service of civilization and that, without the various kinds of neurotic repressions and compromising sublimations which we have evolved, civilizations would not be born. But I do not believe that this essentially pessimistic and tragic view of Freud's can dominate the Christian story. (1978, p.273)

Capturing the psychodynamics of Freud's oedipal drama, Barden notes that for both male and female infants their first love object was their mother and that while:

[B]oth genders valued and wanted a penis; only one gender had to shift the object of desire. Picking a pathway towards mature heterosexuality took the route of rivalrous, anxious renunciation for the boy, as his castration anxiety was resolved through male identification and desire of the female; and envious, resentful compromise for the girl, whose penis envy caused her to reject and then re-identify with the mother as she resolved her castration complex through desire of the male. (2015, pp. 82-83)

Barden appreciates Freud's attempt to deal with the universal themes of "power, desire, fear, growth, gain, loss" (p.96) which the oedipal complex encapsulates, while simultaneously lamenting that Freud's sexual radicalism has been replaced with sexual conservatism: heterosexuality is venerated and homosexuality is *seemingly* cast in its shadow as a failure to achieve a 'healthy' outcome in psychosexual development. However, on further reading this may appear to be too simplistic. Dean and Lane (2001) remind us that Freud envisioned the psyche as bisexual in nature and that these predispositions reside in all human beings. Correspondingly, if an individual has a consciously formed heterosexual object-choice, then their unconscious will be marked by an unrealized homosexual object-choice. In this regard "[if] we accept that everybody has made a homosexual object-choice in his or her unconscious, then it is homophobia, the irrational fear of same-sex desire – including one's own same-sex desire – that generates internal strife and neurosis" (ibid, p.4). Perhaps a more balanced reading would seem to suggest that Freud was perhaps

conflicted about the issue himself. Consequently, he failed to attribute same-sex desire as a healthy outcome to psychosexual development and the Oedipus complex, thereby theoretically privileging heterosexuality.

Freud's privileging of heterosexuality has certainly been problematic for subsequent non-heterosexual people and by separating the sexual and religious impulses he has, I would suggest, unwittingly contributed to reducing sexuality to eroticism - once it becomes severed from its sacred roots. Effectively, eroticism becomes a personal quest about sexual identity and an end in itself, with sex becoming, arguably, "the extreme point of the dehumanization of sex" (Ricoeur, 1964, p.138). Inevitably, once this separation between the sexual and religious impulses gains greater momentum, the Christian Church becomes obsessed with sexual genital-acts in terms of control, sin and repentance. On the one hand, the sexual liberation from the 1960's onwards has undoubtedly been a conscious and considered protest of defiance against a neurotic and intrusive Christianity that has policed the bedroom for far too long; and, at an unconscious level, this seismic shift has also been a necessary *enantiodromia* (running counter to), after centuries of sexual oppression that has been theologically sanctioned by the Church. On the other hand, the sexual impulse has become, not surprisingly, privatized and desacralized, adrift from spiritual significance and meaning.

2.2.2 The Generative Nature of Sexual Ecstasy: Wilhelm Reich

It is perhaps Wilhelm Reich who, above all, from Freud's inner circle, is the most dedicated to understanding and working with the sexual impulse outside of the narrow

parameters of procreation and with a positive and hopeful understanding of its role and benefits for psychological health. Subsequently, Reich coined the phrase “orgone” to describe the positive sexual energy or life force that he believed existed throughout the universe. From his perspective, therefore, he understood the sexual orgasm to be imbued with cosmic energy. He further posited that this energy could be collected and utilized to good therapeutic effect. Subsequently, when an individual’s experience of sexual orgasm was commensurate with their stored-up sexual tension, then that person had reached a healthy state of orgasmic potency. In this way the sexual orgasm was, in Reich’s psychoanalytic terms, recast as the body’s energetic, emotional regulator. The primary purpose of the sexual orgasm, for Reich, was embodied, psychological well-being and not procreation. In this sense, procreation becomes a mere footnote to the sexual orgasm.

Reich’s (1933/1990) research, then, led him to postulate that neuroses are held and expressed in the body and relate to some earlier wound in the patient’s psychosexual development. In this way he began to move away from the classical Freudian technique of interpretation (insight) to remove the neurosis and instead suggested that the energetic release of orgasmic potency (orgasmic catharsis) would free the patient from their anxieties and wounds. For Reich, orgasm is the involuntary release of excitation and pleasure. Hence, he contends that “the establishment of genital primacy not only in theory but in practice; *that is to say, the patient must, through analysis, arrive at a regulated and gratifying genital life* – if he is to be cured and permanently so” (ibid, p.16 – italics in original). Conversely, when an individual’s sexual orgasm was not commensurate with their pent-up sexual tension then orgasmic impotency would ensue. The ramifications of this meant that unexpressed sexual energy would

gradually translate into psychological neurosis and become locked within the body, creating rigidified body-armor. Brady (1947) notes that:

According to Reich, though, only a very few individuals were blessed with orgasmic potency. Society's general anti-sexual attitude, compulsive morality, legally enforced monogamy and family pressures on behalf of pre-marital chastity had so inhibited man's natural sexuality that most of the world was now peopled, said Reich, with orgasmic cripples. (<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>)

Clearly, compared to the later Freud, Reich provides a more positive psychoanalytic understanding of the sexual impulse. His psychoanalytic intent was to release his patients' orgasmic potency and overthrow the social mores of his time which enforced and perpetuated the misery of orgasmic impotency. Understandably, Freud became increasingly disconcerted and discomforted by Reich's radical re-reading of the sexual impulse and the therapeutic function of sexual, orgasmic ecstasy. Not surprisingly then, in 1934, Freud ensured that Reich was expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association. Rubin, rightly points out that initially, Freud and Reich agreed about "the need to change society by liberating the sex lives of the populace" (2003, p.116). Clearly, as Reich's ideas progressed, Freud simultaneously turned the sexual impulse into something dangerous and chaotic, restricting it solely to heterosexual development and procreation. However, like Freud, Reich (1942/1973) would view homoerotic genital acts and homosexual relationships in pathological terms, while insisting that such people should not be persecuted or vilified for their sexual inclinations.

Before moving on to explore Carl Jung's psychological understanding of the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy as a dialectical one, it is essential to mention how Reich (1953/1966) expands his notion of orgasmic potency to Jesus of Nazareth, in his book *The Murder of Christ*. In my view, Reich includes Eros or the sexual instinct as an intra-personal, inter-personal and, also by implication, albeit inadvertently, as a transpersonal dynamic with which to live by; as typified in the life of Jesus Christ. Here, we detect powerful reverberations with Jung's all-encompassing definition of Eros, in sharp contrast to Freud's somewhat reductionist one, whereby the latter links Eros exclusively to sex.

My claim that Reich displays an unformulated spirituality in his concept of orgasmic potency may appear questionable when we consider his explicit denunciation of Jung's corpus as both mystical, and therefore, unscientific (Spiegelman, 1992). However, Spiegelman has argued that while Reich's explicit statement is incontrovertible he nevertheless "comes close to formulating his conclusions quite parallel with those of Jung" (1992, p.15). One of these is encapsulated in Reich's psychological application of polarities or opposites to understand psychological distress and body armor; for example, by configuring anxiety and sexuality into an antipathetic relationship. This helped Reich to understand and treat those patients who, on the one hand, presented with symptoms of neurosis and rigidified body armor, while on the other hand, reported an intense inner feeling of explosive aliveness, which they were unable to release. Critically for Reich (1951/1973), religious people who were unable to release their orgasmic potency for themselves would seek out religious ecstasy as a masochistic way of releasing their sexual tension in the guise of sin. In

this way, based on his sociological observations and analyzing his patients, he understood that for many religious people their faith and their orgasmic potency were in a conflicted relationship. Unable to reconcile these polarities, therefore, led the religious adherent into heightened states of anxiety. Self-recrimination for sexual fantasies, feelings or experiences (albeit, not fully experienced or enjoyed as sexual release) would lead to guilt, penitence and absolution. Hence, pent-up orgasmic potency was released through an acceptable religious process, rather than through an embodied sexual one.

Returning to *The Murder of Christ*, Reich boldly asserts that “we may say that *Christ presents the principle of Life per se*” (1953/1966, p.6 – italics in original). He unequivocally links his universal principle of orgone to the life of Christ and argues that in a distinct sense Jesus quintessentially illustrates the totality of this orgonomic principle or cosmic energy. Thus, in the broadest application of his concept of orgasmic potency, Reich understands Christ’s life and ministry as an unconditional, lavish and unashamed expression of “[his] “*primary*”, [God-given] naturally inborn drives” (ibid, p9). In Reich’s mind, Christ’s passionate embodiment of these God-given, primary inborn drives have unmistakable links with the Edenic bliss enjoyed by Adam and Eve. Perhaps unintentionally, in spite of his critique about the oppressive sexual legacy of organized religion and his rejection of Jung’s mystical stance, by claiming that “*Christ presents the principle of Life per se*” (1953/1966, p.6 – italics in original), he creates a powerful *coniunctio* between spiritual energy and orgasmic potency.

This sex-affirming, body-affirming and life-affirming stance elucidated by the life of Christ and communicated in the pre-Fall mythological story of Adam and Eve, are sharply contrasted with what Reich terms, "The Trap" (ibid, p.10). Rather than confirming and perpetuating this immanent message that the primary gifts of sex and the body, and life itself, are all abundant God-given gifts to be enjoyed in the here-and-now, others would follow to discredit it. This would be replaced with the promise of a transcendent, paradisiacal bliss in the-world-to-come. By implication God's people are, therefore, caught in a trap that needs to be escaped. While Adam and Eve knew nothing of the trap in the Garden of Eden, Augustine's exegesis of Genesis 3, namely that original sin was linked to sex, would create an oppressive prison or trap that continues to haunt Western Christendom. Similarly, St. Paul the Apostle, as we witnessed earlier in our discussion, also contributed to this other-Worldly preachment and promise. Reich notes that St. Paul the Apostle prior to his conversion as Saul of Tarsus was:

The cruel persecutor and murderer of Christ (...). [He] had clearly, but in vain, distinguished between the "BODY," which was god given and good, and the "FLESH", which was devil-ridden and bad [leading to] our present organomic distinction between the "*primary*", naturally inborn drives ("God"), and the "secondary", perverted, evil drives ("Devil", "Sin"). (ibid, p9 – italics and capitals in original)

What comes to mind here is Nietzsche's searing critique quoted earlier in this discussion. Namely, that Christianity's other-Worldly promises of beatific bliss, at the expense of an embodied faith-sex life, divides the body (God-given) and flesh (Devil-given and therefore sinful): thereby portraying them as mutually antagonistic, contrary to Christ's life-affirming orgasmic potency. In short, the authorities of the day were, according to Reich, scandalized by Christ's life-enhancing orgasmic potency and his

unconditional gospel of love. Christ's uncompromising call to lavishly love God and one's neighbour as oneself, and in particular, those who were marginalized by such things as the Levitical Codes of purity deemed that he had to be killed-off. For Reich, this was the psychological reason for the murder of Christ.

2.2.3 The Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: Carl Jung

Arguably, it is Carl Jung who takes a quintessentially positive and constructive approach to sexual and spiritual ecstasy, seeing them at once related in deep dialogue within the psyche and instrumental to the patient's individuation and spiritual growth. In sharp contrast to Freud, Jung did not see the sexual impulse as a dangerous force *per se*, but held the constructive and destructive aspects of Eros in a creative tension forging a more balanced understanding. In fact, he criticized Freud for his reductive account and accused him of dismissing all psychological phenomena to the sexual cause with "monotonous regularity" (Jung, 1928/1960, para. 40), finding him guilty of "pan-sexualism" (ibid, para. 35). Here, Jung contests this view by maintaining that experientially "the spirit senses in sexuality a counterpart equal and indeed akin to itself" (ibid, para. 107). TePaske describes this dialectical dynamic as "the tenacity of bodily and emotional yearning for satisfaction from some soothing other [which] is characteristic of both the religious and sexual instincts" (2008, p.8).

As a result, Jung does not see the Id as the 'driving seat' of the psyche but the Self. The (transpersonal) Self is the organizing principle of the unconscious underpinning the process of human growth, development and individuation. The Self is made up of polarized energies or opposites which are seeking to create a new third or homeostatic centre so that an individual's life does not become lopsided or out of balance. Hence,

the ultimate goal of the sexual and religious impulses “is wholeness, the complete realisation of the blueprint for human existence within the context of the life of the individual” (Stevens, 1994, p.61). In this respect the sexual impulse (Eros) and the religious impulse (Self) are experienced as sacred, holy or numinous in nature (Otto, 1958). Each impulse has a double-sided aspect or light *and* shadow, which can be used in constructive *or* destructive ways in shaping the individual’s unique formation and identity. Hence for Jung, Eros:

[B]elongs on one side to man’s primordial animal nature which will endure as long as man has an animal body. On the other side he is related to the highest forms of spirit. But he thrives only when his spirit and instinct are in right harmony. If one or the other aspect is lacking to him, the result is injury or at least lopsidedness that may easily veer towards the pathological. Too much of the animal distorts civilized man too much civilization makes sick animals. (1917/1926/1943, para. 32)

Jung’s contention that the psyche contains and mediates archetypal energies or psychological opposites, in order to find a psychological centre of gravity, becomes problematic when applied to contra-sexuality. From various perspectives Hopcke (1989), Samuels (1985) and Schaverien (2003), collectively argue that Jung’s respective contra-sexual binaries between men (anima and Logos) and women (animus and Eros) are outdated modes of making sense of gender and sexuality for the modern mind. Samuels and colleagues provide us with an incisive definition if we were to uncritically apply Jung’s theorizing about contra-sexuality:

In a man he becomes dominated by anima and by the Eros principle with connotations of restlessness, promiscuity, moodiness, sentimentality – whatever could be described by unconstrained emotionality. A woman subject to animus and Logos is managerial, obstinate, ruthless, domineering. Both become one-sided. He is seduced by inferior people and forms meaningless attachments; she, being taken in by second-rate thinking, marches forward under the banner of unrelated convictions. (1986, p.24).

Schaverien provides a feminist critique of the application of contra-sexuality contending that such ponderings are the “worst of Jung’s excesses” (2003, p.285) particularly when accompanied with the concepts of Eros and Logos to prescriptively describe feminine and masculine qualities, respectively.

Not surprisingly then, based on the above, Jung clearly declares that a psychologically mature individual will be best fitted for the opposite gender. So,

For a man, a woman is best fitted to be the real bearer of his soul-image, because of the feminine quality of his soul; for a woman it will be a man. Wherever an impassioned, almost magical relationship exists between the sexes, it is invariably a question of a projected soul-image. (1921/1971, para. 809)

By implication same-sex object-choice begins to be framed as some kind of distortion of this heteronormative process of individuation. At some unconscious level the male homosexual over-identifies with his ‘feminine’ anima or soul-image and consequently projects his ‘masculine’ persona outwards onto another man. His outer ‘masculinity’ is thrown away through an unconscious alignment with his inner ‘femininity’. Hence, another man’s ‘maleness’ becomes irresistible and magnetic as the homosexual man attempts to re-introject his disavowed and projected components of ‘masculinity’. A similar process would be levied in relation to a homosexual woman and her animus. Ultimately, for Jung:

[T]he persona being unconscious will be projected on a person of the same sex, thus providing a foundation for many cases of open or latent homosexuality, and of father-transferences in men and mother-transferences in women. In such cases there is always a defective adaptation to reality and a lack of relatedness, because identification with the soul produces an attitude predominantly orientated to the perception of inner processes, and the object is deprived of its determining power. (ibid, para. 809)

Simply put, the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality is that in the former “the persona is projected because of anima identification [and in the latter] the anima/animus is projected because of persona identification” (Hopcke, 1989, p.25).

While Jung did not agree with Freud’s account of sex as simply being an instinctual biological drive, on the issue of heterosexuality, he nevertheless resonates with him to some extent when he asserts that “the real reason [for homosexuality] is the infantile state of a man’s character” (1913/1961, para. 249). On another occasion after analyzing a young homosexual man’s dream Jung refers to the patient as exhibiting a faulty development. He goes on:

The deviation towards homosexuality has, to be sure, numerous historical antecedents. In ancient Greece, as also in certain primitive communities, homosexuality and education were practically synonymous. Viewed in this light, the homosexuality of adolescence is only a misunderstanding of the otherwise very appropriate need for masculine guidance. (1917/1926/1943, para. 173).

Hopcke summarizes Jung’s position here noting that (male) homosexuality invariably constitutes psychological immaturity that derives from a “disturbed and dependent relationship to a woman” (1989, p.18). Samuels’ spells out Jung’s pathogenic understanding of homosexuality in a:

[M]an as resulting from over-involvement with the mother. Further, the masculine side of the homosexual man, which is underdeveloped in reality, is experienced in the idealisation of and fascination by, the penis. Jung has very little to say about female homosexuality, save that there is also over involvement with the mother (1985/1999: 228).

However, Hopcke (1989) is quick to conclude that Jung’s approach to the topic of homosexuality is far from systematic or linear, and that his comments are formulated,

by and large, in relation to specific clinical case studies involving the issue of homosexuality. So, for example, elsewhere when reflecting upon a male patient who had a homosexual relationship and then undertook a heterosexual relationship only to return to a homosexual partner, Jung concluded that:

If we regard sexuality as consisting of a fixed heterosexual and fixed homosexual component, we shall never explain the case, since the assumption of fixed components precludes any form of transformation. In order to do justice to it, we must assume a greater mobility of the sexual components, which even goes so far that one component disappears almost completely while the other occupies the foreground (1913/1961, para. 248).

As I review Jung's concept of contra-sexuality, my sense is that he inadvertently conflates the archetypal energies of anima and animus with the culturally sanctioned gender-sets of his own time. Intermingled, with this socially constructed description of the anima, perhaps we also glimpse the personal contents of his unconscious psyche, which is woven into his notion of the anima. In other words, the specific qualities he associates with the anima are the very virtues he is likely to unconsciously project onto a woman, in order to enhance his own unique individuation process and achieve greater balance between his psychological opposites. Johnson (2010) supports my position here when she shrewdly comments that Jung "was really describing a man's (and his own) Anima complex" (pp.86-87).

Young-Eisendrath (1999) provides us with a critical reappraisal of Jung's concepts of the anima and animus. She underscores the archetypal and universal quality of each individual's contra-sexual needs, while acknowledging that this will in part have some stereotypical components commensurate with any given individual's historical, social, cultural and religious milieu. However, Young-Eisendrath does not equate contra-

sexuality with the opposite gender but rather with any potential lover who will most aptly resonate with our repressed qualities and virtues. As such, each individual will unconsciously project onto a potential suitor their unrealized qualities and virtues to aid their own unique journey towards individuation. Accordingly, this may involve erotically consummated relationships with the opposite-sex or the same-sex or both sexes, across the individual's life cycle.

In my view, Young-Eisendrath's critical re-appraisal goes somewhat in ameliorating against Jung's psychobiography becoming a universal axiom, whereby stereotypical binaries as to what constitutes masculinity and femininity become exclusive, excluding and oppressive. All too often such unchallenged psychological claims have had devastating consequences for those individuals' who simply do not comply with psychological constructs that are heteronormatively prescribed. Indeed, on the whole "psychological narratives have tended to pathologize those instances where the Inner Lover figure is not of the opposite gender, as in homosexual love" (Johnson, 2010, p.87). Here, Johnson uses the phrase Inner Lover figure to transcend the, up until now, gender specific connotations associated with the terms *anima* and *animus*.

Johnson further adds to our discussion by distinguishing two aspects of the Inner Lover figure: that of the Kindred Spirit and that of the Stranger. The quality of the Kindred Spirit is that which is experienced and sought as *similar* in the other, and the Stranger component is that which is perceived and felt as *different* in the other. Hence, in heterosexual love the strangeness, mystery and complementarity of the individual is projected and carried by the person's *opposite-sex*; and kinship is experienced by the similarities that the couple share outside of the contra-sexual differences such as

values, beliefs and qualities. Whereas, in homosexual love the strangeness, mystery and complementarity of the individual is projected and carried by virtues and qualities other than the same gender; and kinship is experienced by sharing in the *same-sex* union. Once contra-sexuality is reconfigured in this way, as the Inner Lover figure, then this helps us to de-pathologize the homophobic leanings embedded in Jung's concept and understand the psychological benefits of sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E. Indeed:

If the archetype of the Inner Partner is constellated by an attraction to an *outer beloved*, then falling in love with a real man or a real woman can also be the gateway to the lover's unconscious. If the experience of falling in love is constellated by an attraction to an *Inner Partner*, then this inner attraction can also be a gateway to human passionate love. We can see from this how erotic love can be a critical means towards becoming whole. (ibid, p.89)

Prior to the innovative and creative contributions of Young-Eisendrath and Johnson, who have critiqued and updated Jung's psychological concept of contra-sexuality, Mitchell Walker, both as a Jungian Analyst and as a gay man, provided a unique way of understanding same-sex desire in a much more wholesome manner than had previously been envisioned with the notion of contra-sexuality. His initial starting point was to critique Freud and Jung, among others, who used Plato's *Symposium* to theorize about heterosexual attraction while blatantly leaving out the homoerotic elements overtly expressed in Plato's work. Walker (1976) conceptualizes the archetypal configuration of the Double to understand homosexuality, group bonding and war. Here, he integrates the anima/animus with the Double to create an androgynous wholeness based on complementarity. Walker argues that "the Double can be a soul-mate of intense warmth and closeness. Love between men and between women, as a psychic experience, is often rooted in projection of the Double, just as Anima/us is projected between the different sexes" (<http://uranianpsych.org>). As a

result, the Double can be a magical and a mystical helper to support the individual's struggles towards individuation. It can come in the form of a heroic bond. Examples of this heroic bond are noted within the account of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the heroic bond between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament. Upon learning of the death of Jonathan, King David expresses his experience of their heroic bond in the following way: "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of a women" (2 Samuel 1: 26). The Double can also foster an intimate collaboration between two men or two women, giving birth to new and creative ventures or ideas. What can be gleaned from these handful of examples is that:

[A]lthough the Double is conceived of as a kind of soul-figure, the sexual instinct may or may not become overtly genitally involved. That is, the Double motif may possess an erotic quality that tends towards manifest homosexuality in its personal engagement, but not necessarily. This understanding follows from imagining that the archetypal psyche in every person possesses an Anima/us and a Double, yet the sexually stimulating valency accorded to these figures through complex formation differs according to the configurating experience of sexual orientation. In that differentiated sense, I would picture the Double as embodying the spirit of love between those of the same sex, regardless of that spirit's role in the genital development of erotic love for any particular person. And this spirit of loving twinship in the Double is what I see as the supportive ground of the ego in its congruent gender identity. (<http://uranianpsych.org>)

Just as we have observed a powerful re-reading of Jung's notion of contra-sexuality from a feminist vantage point with the help of Young-Eisendrath (1999) and Johnson (2010), we also see a radical re-envisioning of contra-sexuality with the incorporation of the Double, from a man who is both an American gay activist and Jungian psychologist.

Jung's heteronormative bias and privilege is also espoused in his seminal paper, 'The psychology of the transference' (1946/1966) when he critically incorporates the

Rosarium Philisophorum, an alchemical text, believed to be dated back to the year 1550, into his analytical psychology. Briefly put, the series of prints from the *Rosarium Philisophorum* outline a process of transformation. The structures and materials necessary for this process include: the *vas* (vessel), the *prima materia* and *massa confusa* (various chemical mixtures), the *lapis* (the longed-for gold created between the mixtures), the *coniunctio* (the combination of opposites producing gold), the *hieros gamos* (the sacred marriage between the King and Queen). When this process and stages of transformation are applied to the analytic encounter we get: the analytic space (*vas*), in which the opposites of patient and analyst are mixed together (*prima materia* and *massa confusa*) which leads to the process of individuation (*lapis*) and specifically the union of opposites in the patient's psyche, the interpenetration of patient and analyst and the interpenetration of conscious and unconscious (the *coniunctio*). This process leads to the conjunction of opposites, a transformation, and a new third that contributes to the patient's journey of individuation (the *hieros gamos*). The above metaphorical image holds immense theoretical and clinical leverage when contemplating the transference and counter-transference of the analytic dyad and indeed on a wide range of issues, such as sexuality, politics, race and the erotic life of any couple or collective, either within the therapeutic context or outside. But does the gender-specific categories of the Divine (male) King and Divine (female) Queen of the *Rosarium Philisophorum* have anything to say to non-heterosexual clergy of the C of E?

One might justifiably wonder whether Freud, Reich and Jung are simply products of their own time when it comes to their theorizing about heterosexuality and homosexuality. Schaverien (2002) is quick to assert that it would be premature to

dismiss Jung based on his misogyny lest we throw out invaluable insights that need critiquing and updating. However, in his in-depth scholarly work, Heuer (2017) has revealed how Otto Gross influenced both Freud and Jung greatly with regard to their distinctive approach to depth psychology. There has also been conjecture that he also influenced Reich. However, Reich never cited Gross in his work. Given that he was an ardent reader of psychoanalysis, Heuer finds it inconceivable that Reich did not come across Gross' publications that were issued some ten years before. And yet, while Gross was a product of his time – like Freud, Reich and Jung – he nonetheless understood bisexuality as a given and understood this dynamic in more positive and psychologically propagative terms. In this respect, Werfel (1990), reflecting on Gross' psychological contribution to the issue of homoerotic desires notes that:

Homosexuality, according to his views, had a great task to fulfil in the psychic life of humanity. In essence, it raised the [sexual] drive above its bestial limitations. Only homosexuality taught both genders respectively an understanding of why it was loveable as gender. Without a man, for example, having an innermost (same-sex) feeling experience of why he was loved as a man, he remained coarse and clumsy. Only the homosexual aspect of his character allowed him to comprehend and tenderly respect the woman as lover. (Werfel, 1990, p.352 cited in Heuer, 2017, p.61)

Clearly, Otto Gross was a radical psychoanalytic thinker ahead of his time. Here, I am reminded of Fox's term *prophet* that would aptly describe Gross. This is someone who is not simply willing to acquiesce to the dominant psychological concepts of their day, but instead courageously challenge and "interfere (...) with the prevailing attitudes and ideologies" (1995/2003, p.x). This term would certainly resonate with Gross' radical politics and his psychoanalytic commitment to connecting inner-personal transformation, with outer-collective change.

Returning to the heteronormative bias embedded within the opus of Freud, Reich and Jung, it is interesting to note that this very issue has recently resurfaced and been addressed within contemporary Jungian circles that is worthy of our attention; particularly as this relates to the *coniunctio* discussed above. In the introduction to 'Analytical psychology and homosexual orientation' Withers (2003) sets out the three distinct contributions of Carl Jung (*coniunctio*), Sigmund Freud (paternal intercourse or primal scene) and Wilfred Bion (container and contained) to discuss homosexual desire and relations. While highlighting their different approaches he also honours the resonance between these three images asserting their held belief that unless this 'knowledge' of the 'interpenetrating couple' is imbedded at the centre of the psyche, then inner and outer problems will arise in the field of relatedness. To my mind Freud and Bion have an etiological or prescriptive 'spin' to their image. In sharp contrast, Jung has a teleological or proscriptive 'take' on the need to be penetrated and to be penetrating in our inner and outer life, at the psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual levels of intercourse. While this is a significant contribution to a range of issues, an awkward question nevertheless needs to be raised and asked: what do the Divine King and Queen of the *coniunctio* - a heterosexual couple - have to say to homosexual people on the varying levels of intercourse named above?

While Carvalho (2003) acknowledges that there can be both constructive and destructive expressions of homosexuality and heterosexuality, he nevertheless wants to maintain the heterosexual couple of the *coniunctio* to metaphorically represent psychic life. While he is suggesting that he would not have any problems envisioning a homosexual *coniunctio*, he nevertheless is concerned that to do so would be too premature given the emerging and shifting patterns in parenting (same-sex; single-

parents, etc.). In other words, a homosexual *coniunctio* may not 'chime' with the individual and collective unconscious and cause psychological confusion and 'discord'. In sharp contrast, Denman (2003) condemns this gender specific frame of reference. From her perspective the heterosexually privileged *coniunctio* is an explicit (albeit a subtle one) championing of heterosexual primacy and the implicit expression of homophobia within the Jungian tradition. She strongly asserts that:

Homophobia has damaged lives and continues to do so. Jungians have been complicit in this active hatred and, as is often the Jungian way, by silence in the face of homophobic prejudice of others. Most importantly, homophobic practice is prejudicial to the successful treatment of certain patients. (ibid, 2003, 169).

Is Denman making too much of the heterosexual *coniunctio* given that it is a symbolic representation and an accessible portrayal of, for instance, the inner and outer, conscious and unconscious dynamics of everyday life? Samuels (2001) argues that the heterosexual primal scene of the *coniunctio* does not exclude people of a homosexual orientation. Furthermore, he suggests that the image incorporates and communicates 'fruitfulness' (integration and transformation of opposites) and 'problems' (disintegration and conflict of opposites) that are embedded and compatible with homosexual experience. In addition, given the symbolic nature of this image (i.e. as a non-biological and non-reproductive one) it is still able to hold the tensions of diversity, potential, otherness and conflict.

Here, Samuels is arguing that regardless of our sexual orientation we are created and emerge from the sexual intercourse between man and a woman, both in its chthonic form in the primal scene or the container-contained motif, and in its spiritual form as a *coniunctio* or sacred-marriage. However, Denman rightly questions whether this

seemingly logical argument suggests a subtle privileging of a heteronormativity that hides a homophobic attitude within Jungian psychology? I wonder whether this is yet another heteronormative bias that all too readily overlooks the spiritual and chthonic needs of non-heterosexual people to be psychologically mirrored and celebrated within the portrayal of a same-sex *coniunctio* and, for that matter, a same-sex primal scene of the image of container-contained. In the meantime, as I ponder the above, I am compelled to empirically put this controversy to the test and phenomenologically measure how same-sex LGBT C of E clergy respond to a *coniunctio* that deeply resonates and reverberates with their preferred sexual orientation and expression.

2.2.4 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: Further Transpersonal Perspectives

In more recent times transpersonal clinicians, writers and researchers have explored the personal, psychological and theological meanings that are attributed to sexual and spiritual ecstasy by heterosexual and LGBT participants. In particular investigators have earnestly set out to record their participants' unique experiences of their mystical union with the Divine through the human portal of sexual ecstasy. In addition, they have considered with their respondents the direct impact that such experiences have had upon their psychological well-being, and their human growth and spiritual development. Of major significance is the research study carried out by Wade (2004), which led her to coin the phrase "transcendent sex" to denote the interpenetrating nature of her participants' sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and their deep sense of being touched by God during sexual intercourse. However, she conceded that providing a simple definition of transcendent sex was not straightforward.

Instead, based on the verbatim analysis of her participants' experiences, Wade noted two characteristics that captured the non-ordinary experiences of transcendent sex. Firstly, she noted that respondents reported that the philosophical legacy of Cartesian-Dualism that continues to cast a shadow on the Western World were dislocated and transformed. Hence, dualistic notions of past and present, and time and space were transcended during the sexual union and were not tied to the moment of climax for most participants. Secondly, those participants who reported an experience of transcendent sex noted that a cosmic or transpersonal force, which was described by many names such as "God, the Divine, the Oversoul, the Void, etc." (ibid, p.271) touched one or both lovers deeply. However, while Wade struggles with a definitive definition she does, nevertheless, in phenomenological and process terms capture the manifestation of transcendent sex as:

[G]oing beyond the bodies that encapsulate our separate selves, our senses, our egos, our climaxes, and our suffering without leaving our bodies behind. They become a vehicle for a grace that transfigures all of the human condition. The nexus of Spirit and flesh illuminates and sanctifies all creation. It allows us to see everything, even our naked bodies and our physical desires, in the incandescence of perfect beauty, holiness and love. (Ibid, p.261)

Wade's study comprised of 91 heterosexual and LGBT participants. They reported that as a result of transcendent sex they experienced spiritual awakening, personal growth, enhanced relationships, comprehended a greater reality, experienced the sacralising of sex and personal healing. The largest cluster of data for Wade constellated around the theme of the Void, *Unio Mystica* and the Third. The Void relates to the Buddhist notion of non-dualism when the beyond is reached: "[A] beyond that, confined to absolutely nothing, embraces absolutely everything" (Wilber, 2000, p.310). As we noted in the previous chapter the *Unio Mystica* signifies the all-consuming and ecstatic

mystical union ('sacred marriage') between the religious worshipper and God. Haule's in-depth exploration of the archetypes of romantic love, and in particular his notion of the Third aptly resonates with Wade's findings. A significant number of her participants experienced a cosmic presence touching the sexual encounter with the sacred. From his meticulous studies of gathering materials from literature, mythology and religion, along with stories from everyday life about the transformative potential of romantic love Haule concludes that the Third:

[S]eems to be transpersonal, autonomous, directing intelligence, mutual to the two partners, somehow constituted by their union, and yet not reducible to either of them nor directly manipulable. (...) [I]t appears that the joining point in our love-union with God resembles a Third, constituted by the two of us and yet distinct. (1990, p.195)

Similarly, Haule's observation that the Third cannot be manipulated at will or linked to a particular sexual practice, but rather that something is given also chimes with Wade's findings that transcendent sex emerged as a gift of grace. Likewise, Elfers (2009) reports that all of his 8 participants experienced a sudden transpersonal awakening through ecstatic sex that was unsolicited. Further, they enjoyed blissful states of transcendence which were highly embodied in nature. These moments of mystical sex circumvented their assumptions about themselves, others and the world around them that was initially discombobulating. After this initial shaking-up, respondents reported a deepening of their identity, purpose and meaning. Indeed:

Through profound sexual experiences and awakenings, all co-researchers felt a dramatic connection to a power or force beyond the limits of their personal identity and outside of their previous history or experience. Sex as transpersonal development for co-researchers began with a sense of Oneness in which polarities and opposites dissolved. The boundaries between male and female, subject and object, inner and outer, transcendent and embodied, were loosened, dissolved, or even obliterated. (ibid, p.121)

Clearly, within the field of transpersonal research significant evidence is accruing about the dialectical nature of sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Specifically, how sexual ecstasy can lead to a mystical union with God that not only is transformative but also enhances and expands the participants' sense of self, and their place and connection in the world, as a sacred reality.

2.2.5 Summary

As we come to the end of this psychological exploration about the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and non-heterosexual people, what can be contended is that like Freud, Jung clearly had a conflicted or paradoxical view about same-sex desire and homoerotic object-choice. Furthermore, Reich had rigid views about the primacy of heterosexuality. In addition, Freud desacralized the sexual impulse and eventually moved from a generative to a destructive understanding of this instinct. Whereas, Reich denounced the religious impulse he nevertheless held on to the sexual impulse as a positive function for psychological health and mental well-being. Jung, on the other hand, continued to maintain that sexual and spiritual ecstasy are in a unique and important relationship: that these two primary impulses were essential to human growth and spiritual development. In more recent years there has been a burgeoning corpus of literature and research that underscores the indivisible relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and how mystical union with the divine through sexual ecstasy can be both transformative, leading to psychological growth and spiritual development.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide an in-depth exploration about the methodology employed to carry out this current research project. The challenge here, as I see it, is to illustrate how my recursive literature review, explicated in the previous chapter, has shaped and informed my research methodology and interview design. Hence, it will be necessary to discuss my rationale for integrating a Transpersonal Awareness with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in greater depth, and address the philosophical assumptions underpinning this. In addition, a detailed account of the recruitment process, data collection and levels of analysis that were subsequently undertaken will also be addressed. Finally, issues of validity and reliability will be discussed.

3.1 Towards a Methodological Integration of Transpersonal Awareness with IPA

In this subsection I begin by charting the post-modernist stance on 'truth'. How, in particular, the diversification of truth makes it incumbent upon the qualitative researcher to electronically gather rich verbal accounts of participants' lived experiences and to faithfully analyse these to honour their reality. These verbal accounts, therefore, will need to be subjected to several layers of analysis to discern superordinate themes (and subthemes), in order to provide essential information regarding the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E. During this chapter I will briefly address another possible qualitative research method that was considered and ultimately dismissed; namely, Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). This discussion

will then segue into a critique of a purely applied IPA methodology as a way of justifying my integration of Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA research method.

Post-modernism argues that with the growing knowledge about the diversification of multiple lifestyles and experiences, the notion of an overarching narrative or exacting theory to capture human experience, in its totality, is nigh impossible thus rendering any meaningful metanarrative as an obsolete exercise. In effect post-modernists maintain that there is no clear access into the inner world of another human subject and that any attempts to do so are unavoidably filtered through the researcher's social class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and linguistic framework. As Denzin and Lincoln note:

There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed. Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts or stories about what they did and why. (2013, p.24)

While I agree with this observation, such a stance is all too often used to justify a purely social constructivist reading of an individual's experience. Namely, "that sexual orientation, just like other aspects of our identity, comes about because of what is going on around us and the social knowledge we acquire" (Cornwall, 2013, p.7). In short, an anti-essentialist reading on human experience is privileged. The challenge that emerges from this pluralisation of 'truth', as I see it, is for the qualitative researcher to return to what Toulmin (1990) has called, the *oral*, the *particular*, the *local* and the *timely* (cited in Flick, 2009, p.21). By rising to this challenge, it is incumbent upon the researcher to faithfully gather and disseminate participants' unique, embodied experiences. As a transpersonal qualitative researcher, therefore, I am inspired by

Toulmin's (1990) petition. Subsequently, my intention is to collect verbal data (*oral*) to capture the knowledge and experiences (*local*) of heterosexual and LGBT clergy from the C of E in respect of a tangible problem (*particular*) that has become unprecedented in the Church's history (*timely*). It is in this way that I wish to investigate the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, which strongly lends itself, in part, to incorporating a qualitative method of enquiry. Or as Silverman succinctly puts it: "If you are concerned with exploring people's life histories or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured" (2013, p.11). A further corroborating factor for employing a qualitative research method is borne out of the researcher's genuine "wish to be able to demonstrate that already known propositions are true (verification) and a wish to generate new propositions about the world (discovery)" (McLeod, 2011, p.13). This wish or desire certainly resonates with my own curiosity as a transpersonal researcher, as I explore the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

These aforementioned broad brushstrokes about the wider remit of qualitative research can be legitimately narrowed down to adopting an IPA approach due to its innate "focus (...) on the experience of the lifeworld, which is at the core of all phenomenological inquiry" (Langdridge, 2007, p.107). Here, the idiographic emphasis of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) which is designed to elicit and represent particular 'facts' and processes from participants, is desirable. This is in sharp contrast to a nomothetic approach that is designed to discover generalisable scientific laws associated with quantitative research. So, by gathering rich description (Richards, 2009) or thick descriptive data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) from C of E participants I hope to explore their nuanced experiences of their sexuality and spirituality. Once the data has been collected in the form of recorded transcripts via semi-structured interviews, I will then

embark upon several levels of analysis and translate these experiences into pre-existing psychological constructs (McLeod, 2011). The idiographic approach then, related to IPA, along with the associated process described above, both aptly resonate with my focus on the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy serving the C of E as ordained priests.

Based upon my literature review in Chapter 2, I did consider the plausibility of incorporating a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) as a way of generating new theoretical categories to make sense of the distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT C of E clergy. My rationale here was to forge a new pathway with which to overcome the current dualistic ('either/or') impasse constellated around this issue, particularly for LGBT priests, by casting a new found dialectical ('both-and'), conceptual frame. However, while grounded theory is another variant of qualitative and therefore, phenomenological enquiry, it has a propensity to foster "abstract categories, rather than relying solely on description of lived experiences" (McLeod, 2011, p.144). In addition, grounded theory is designed to generate cause-and-effect connections moving towards generalised findings that apply to all participants, which surprisingly replicates a quantitative research project in some ways. However, after careful consideration it became apparent that IPA would, albeit partially, be more exacting to validate propositions already proven about the mystical possibilities that sexual ecstasy can potentially exert upon the human subject. Furthermore, IPA by its very nature is intent upon faithfully re-presenting participants' lived experiences through thick descriptions, inviting individuals to tell their stories from a particular time and place. This felt crucial given the current state of play within the C of E on the matter of human sexuality and faith. In effect, with grounded theory's

reliance on abstract units of meaning, this could overshadow and eclipse the personal units of meaning of participants. Similarly, abstract units of meaning could also obscure similarities and differences, as clusters of meanings emerge across the sample.

Nevertheless, adopting a purely based IPA methodology is arguably limited, given the spiritual focus of this current study. On the one hand, IPA has a propensity to move towards a 'naïve realism' positing that reality is knowable and objective, and on the other hand, that knowledge is purely the result of the wider contextual factors such as historical, societal, cultural and religious influences. Hence, as noted above, there can be no absolute truth claims about the world, which is known as 'radical constructionism' (Willig, 2009). This 'either/or' position about 'truth' being absolute or socially constructed is problematic. Some truths continue to have an abiding resonance in the annals of human history and human experience. Therefore, these experiences cannot be simply reduced to being the product of the historical, societal, cultural and religious contexts from within which a participant makes sense of their lived-experience-in-the-world. Equally, these experiences cannot be amplified and reified to apply to all people, at all times.

So, by integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology I aim to occupy the middle ground between 'naïve realism' and 'radical constructionism' to honour the nuanced and complex nature of 'truth' as this pertains to my participants' experiences of their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. A methodology solely wedded to 'radical constructivism' would involve a hermeneutic of suspicion that has the propensity to

deconstruct participants spiritual experiences from an existential and, by and large, an atheistic position, thereby possibly committing “interpretative violence” (Willig, 2012, p.54). Likewise, a methodology solely aligned with ‘naïve realism’ could all too readily interpret spiritual data at face value without critical analysis, thereby valorising participants spiritual experiences uncritically. Consequently, I hold that truth evolves and emerges out of the intricate interplay between essence and social construction, between raw experience and the multifarious contextual lenses through which human beings filter and give shape to their experience. In this sense, integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology is designed to honour and analyse the intricate interplay between essence and social construction for the research participants. Ironically, while post-modernism deconstructed the tyranny of absolute truth claims embedded in modernism and pre-modernism, it has nevertheless valorised *experience* as a fundamental measure of ‘truth’ thereby ratifying *spiritual experiences* as a legitimate source of knowledge and information about the divine, the sacred or the holy.

Vale and Mohs (1998) bring further depth and texture to this discussion by highlighting the subtle distinction between a research mind based on an existential-phenomenological awareness and a research sensibility approaching a topic of enquiry with transpersonal-phenomenological awareness. With an existential-phenomenological awareness intentionality refers to the nature of consciousness as it presents itself whether this is in relation to a feeling, a person, a thing or an object. In other words, “intentionality directly implies the deep, implicit interrelatedness between the perceiver and the perceived that characterises consciousness in this approach [and] through disciplined reflection (...) illumine[s] the meaning that was previously

implicit and unlanguage” (ibid, 1998, pp.99-100). In sharp contrast, a transpersonal-phenomenological awareness is receptive to and sensitive to the soul or spiritual experiences that emanate *prior to* the reflective and pre-reflective focus that is embedded within an existential-phenomenological stance which cannot be merely attributed to perceiver and perceived. In this sense:

Experiences that present themselves as passionate, peaceful, or as an integrated awareness of these two become the focus for exploring in a direct, empirical, and human scientific way the nature of transcendent experience as we live it. Here are the “flesh” and promise of a transpersonal-phenomenological psychology. (ibid. 1998: 105)

By integrating an IPA methodology with Transpersonal Awareness this will support both researcher and participants to explore the “most profound aspects of human experience, such as mystical and unitive experiences, personal transformation (...) [and] experiences of wonder and ecstasy, and alternative expansive states of consciousness” (Braud and Anderson 1998, p.xxi). And, as an addendum to this point, Cortright (1997) has passionately argued that transpersonal psychology is an exclusive paradigm: it not only creates a psychological approach to human experience that is compellingly integrative, but it also provides a distinctive and unique way of framing psychological life in spiritual terms. He boldly concludes that: “Our true identity, as opposed to our surface identification, is spiritual in nature, and any psychology that does not acknowledge this must necessarily be incomplete and fragmentary” (ibid, 1997, p.243).

Having now justified and defended my position of integrating a Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology, it will now be timely to highlight and distinguish the existential and transpersonal philosophies underpinning my approach. How

collectively, they supply me with a rich set of researcher values and qualities with which to conduct my research.

3.2 Phenomenological and Transpersonal Philosophical Underpinnings

Phenomenological analysis is rooted in phenomenological philosophy. While there are competing philosophical perspectives from within this broad tradition it is arguably possible to distil shared understandings between different contributors and discuss how these philosophical insights are informing this study. Namely, integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology. It will also be expedient to bring to bear the perennial, immanent and participatory philosophies that underpin the transpersonal nature of this research project to critique the existential leanings of later phenomenologists, that purportedly can be used to discount religious experience as merely a product of ‘radical constructionism’ (Willig, 2009); thereby diminishing any essentialist findings that might arise from the rich, textured data from participants.

As the forbearer of phenomenological philosophy, Husserl (1931/1967) wanted to move away from our tendency to organise and interpret human experience into pre-existing groupings, categories or classifications which he called our “natural attitude”, and instead return “back to the things in themselves” (Langdridge, 2007: 107). “The ‘thing’ he is referring to, then, is the *experiential content* of consciousness” (Smith et al. 2009: 12 – italics added). By adopting a “phenomenological attitude” (Husserl, 1931/1967) the aim, from a place of reflexive awareness, is to be curious about the internal perception of the experience under scrutiny, rather than being distracted by the external object of consciousness. In other words, by returning to the things in

themselves Husserl implores the current day researcher to acknowledge and explore the world as a lived experience and not as an object to be analysed. This has certainly been instrumental in employing an IPA methodology integrated with transpersonal awareness and shaped the earnest attempt to faithfully gather the lived experience of heterosexual and LGBT clergy in respect of their gender, sexuality and spirituality.

In a real sense, Husserl provided an incisive critique of science as the dominant arbitrator of truth by exposing that “science as a second-order knowledge system [was heavily dependent] upon first-order personal experience” (Smith, et al. 2009: 15). Consequently, his descriptive phenomenology was dedicated to the careful, precise and rigorous examination of his experiences in order to identify the *essential qualities* of that experience. Once these could be determined the next task was to ascertain whether these essential qualities went *beyond* the particularities of the topic under scrutiny to provide a more universal application about the human condition. Smith and co-authors caution the contemporary researcher by noting two critical points: firstly, Husserl is a philosopher and not a researcher and as such does not map out clear steps, for example, involving eidetic induction (the process of moving from the individual experience to a universal or essential one); and secondly, his preoccupation with first-person processes were precisely that – he conducted phenomenological investigations into his own processes, not other peoples’ experiences. What I take from this is the criticality of reflexivity to mitigate against my own lived experiences of sexual and spiritual ecstasy wielding undue bias on my participants’ responses. How in particular reflexivity intersects with the rule of ‘epoché’ or ‘bracketing’ to suspend, as far as is humanly possible, my own “natural attitude” (Husserl, 1931/1967) or pre-existing groupings, categories or classifications.

While Husserl arguably exhibited an over-ambitious desire to describe the *essence* of experience, it is Heidegger who is committed to uncovering the *existential* nature of experience. Heidegger (1927/1962) is consequently associated with the “hermeneutic turn” in phenomenological philosophy (Langdridge, 2007, p.41). He subsequently rejected Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology as untenable. Instead, he insisted that human beings are so inherently embedded in an embodied, intersubjective web of relatedness - something that Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) also underscores - that *existence* and not essence (i.e. transcending the particularities of experience into a structural essence) is the forum for meaning-making and interpretation. In short, Heidegger’s (1927/1962) hermeneutic phenomenology underscores man as *Dasein*, that is existence (*Existenz*) and as such, existence *precedes* essence. Willig defines Heidegger’s phenomenology of suspicion to imply that:

[O]ur experiences and perceptions of the world are mediated by our relationship with the world and, therefore, it is not possible simply to ‘describe’ objects and events in their ‘pure’ form [and as such] there is no such thing as a ‘pure form’ (or indeed ‘essence’). (2012, p.35)

It is interesting to note that Heidegger was brought up a Roman Catholic and some commentators accuse him of being unclear on the issue of existence *preceding* essence that warrant subsequent elucidations that he was promulgating an atheistic philosophy. Heidegger protested, in no uncertain terms, against such claims arguing that his philosophy neither denied nor confirmed the existence of God. Copleston incisively critiques Heidegger on this point arguing that:

The problem of the existence of God cannot be raised on the level of thought to which the existential analysis of man belongs; it can be raised only on the plane of “the holy”. Modern man is so absorbed in his preoccupations in the world that he is not open to the plane of “the holy”, and the idea of God, as traditionally interpreted, as retreated from his consciousness. (1956, pp.182-183)

Nonetheless, Heidegger's gift to conduct my research is his view that as human beings we are entities to be analysed in order to explore what it means to be human. In this sense, he moves away from an abstract or 'an outsider looking-in' position as to what constitutes the human being (essence), to 'an insider looking-out' position (existence) to explore what it means to be human.

Willig (2012) provides a much-needed compromise between 'naïve realism' on the one hand, and 'radical constructionism' on the other, which is incorporated within the broad spectrum of phenomenological philosophies. These opposing paradigms appear to be borne out of Husserl and Heidegger's philosophical legacies which Willig aptly translates into the researcher stance of empathic immersion and suspicious curiosity, respectively. The double-hermeneutic advocated by Smith, et al. (2009), discussed in Chapter 1, is highly relevant for me to adopt as a researcher when conducting interviews. When the participant is trying to make sense of their world, and I am likewise trying to analyse their levels of meaning, I need to occupy the middle ground between empathy and suspicion. By holding these philosophical positions in a creative tension, I will be more equipped to tease out the delicate and intricate interplay between essence and constructivism. And most importantly, as a means of avoiding "interpretative violence" (Willig, 2012, p.54), particularly against a specific group of participants – LGBT clergy of the C of E – whose life choices are frequently misinterpreted or distorted; leaving many silenced in respect of their lived experiences about their sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

A further measure to mitigate against the atheistic leanings attributed to the existential philosophers I am integrating (thereby diminishing participants' transpersonal experiences to purely contextual factors) is to bring to bear the transpersonal philosophies that are also underpinning my research methodology. By discussing the attendant philosophies attached to the 'upward-ladder' (Wilber, 2000), 'downward-spiral' (Washburn, 1988; 1994; 2003) and 'participatory-relational' (Ferrer, 2011) approaches to the transpersonal, I hope to establish a multifarious and textured receptivity to the nature of my participants' mystical union through sexual ecstasy. Given my sample of C of E priests will presumably have a regular contemplative prayer life, do they attribute such moments of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) to their spiritual development (upward-ladder)? Or, could such experiences suddenly emerge from the ground of their being (downward-spiral)? Or, alternatively, as a result of their significant connection with another human being (participatory-relational)? Or, are all three philosophical perspectives at play in subtle and overlapping ways? These are important considerations to hold as I explore such important transpersonal philosophies underpinning my integration of Transpersonal Awareness with IPA.

In the 1990's several commentators such as Tarnas (1991) and Heron (1996) for example, began to question Ken Wilber's (amongst others) privileging of the perennial philosophy. This is sometimes referred to as religious universalism. Since the so-called 'birth' of transpersonal psychology some three decades earlier the perennial philosophy had, up until this point, dominated transpersonal discourse in terms of theory, practice and research. In brief, the perennial philosophy underscores a hierarchical or stepped approach to encountering the sacred by drawing upon diverse religious traditions to craft a universal pathway to spiritual transcendence. This

ascendency towards transcendence is achieved through the individual's spiritual practices in order to move upwards through the Centaur, Subtle, Causal and Non-Dual stages of consciousness (Wilber, 2000). Without question the perennial philosophy is based upon ancient doctrinal views as to what constitutes an upward motion of spiritual growth and development. This places the non-dual, revered within Buddhism and various forms of Hinduism, at the highest level of spiritual advancement and maturity.

This stepped-approach articulated by the perennial philosophy reminds me of Jacob's ladder which the Patriarch dreams of as he flees from his brother Esau. Thus, revealing to him the rungs of the ladder that connect heaven and earth (Genesis 28: 10-17). Fox (1999) critiques this image as indicative of the patriarchal-hierarchical legacy that continues to cast a shadow upon Western religiosity. A legacy that debatably neglects the sacred interconnectedness of all living things with its over-preoccupation with transcendence. TePaske is equally critical on this front arguing that: "Western ecclesiastical and philosophical history of the Spirit in its masculine nuance tends to seek its exclusive ends by objectifying, denying, transcending, essentializing or otherwise demeaning the created world" (2008, p.11).

Returning to the claim that the non-dual is the highest form of spiritual development, and arguably an exclusive state of consciousness achieved by a favoured few, Heron, has equally been uncompromising in his critique of the perennial philosophy. In this regard Heron claims that transpersonal psychology has been:

[D]ominated by male theorists, some of whom uphold the dubious notion of a perennial philosophy, which seeks to elevate and universalise one traditional stand, Hindu-Buddhist nondualism, and

make it the controlling paradigm for all past, present and future spiritual belief and experience. (1998, pp. 3-4)

One can only imagine the male transpersonal theorists Heron is targeting with his searing comments. For the record, Wilber (2000) has strenuously defended himself against such accusations. He quotes Riane Eisler to justify his perennial philosophy arguing “that an important distinction should be made between domination and actualization hierarchies” (Eisler 1987, cited in Wilber, 2000, p.30). While I think this is an important differentiation to make, it does not easily eradicate the possible exclusivity, and perhaps even hubris, attached to those who claim that the non-dual is the highest pinnacle of spiritual advancement.

In contrast to Wilber’s (2000) perennial philosophy, Ferrer (2011) along with Heron (1996; 1998) and Tarnas (1991), propose a “participatory turn” in transpersonal psychology. Here, a specifically non-hierarchical philosophy devoid of pre-existing, reified or hierarchical spiritual ‘truths’ is being excavated: in its stead an inclusive and expansive spirituality is championed. The corresponding corollary of this is that an emancipatory and transformative spirituality can be accessed individually, relationally and corporately. Ferrer’s (2011) aim here is to forge an egalitarian, social and pluralistic understanding of the multiple ways in which human beings can, in co-created terms, experience and access the sacred. His ultimate hope is that these relationally mediated experiences of the transpersonal will inspire and mobilise participants to actively campaign against human injustice, exploitation and suffering as these occur within the individual, social, political and ecological domains of life. Such are the emancipatory and transformative possibilities and potentialities

embedded within the participatory approach to the sacred, posed by Ferrer. And, as I see it, how these co-created or relationally mediated experiences of the divine can potentially combat or counteract the shadow of individualism and exclusivity hiding behind the perennial philosophy.

To my mind, this is evocative of the Biblical story of what has come to be known as Sarah's circle denoting an expansive and inclusive compassionate welcome to the three strangers who visit them near the great trees of Mamre (Genesis 18: 1-15). As the image implies, a circle knows no beginning or end, and has the potential to expand and be all-encompassing in its welcome and concern for humans, non-human creatures and the planet. On this note, Daniels (2009) describes the participatory approach as a third vector in the history of transpersonal psychology coining the phrase "extending" to capture its unique spirit. As discussed above this distinct social, political and transpersonal spirit is designed to tackle hierarchical and patriarchal sensibilities, and eco-centrism that invariably are at the centre of human oppression and suffering, and ecological violence. By implication the "relational-participatory" emphasis is in contradistinction to the perennial philosophy. Interestingly, Daniels (2009) names the latter as other-worldly transcendence (the first vector) and depth psychological approaches such as Jung (1951-1968), Washburn (1988; 1994; 2003) and Grof (1985) as this-worldly immanence (the second vector).

I would suggest that to dismiss the perennial philosophy outright would be tantamount to discounting thousands of years of spiritual wisdom and discernment regarding practices that enhance spiritual transcendence, growth and development. Equally, to

ignore the contribution of the participatory turn could potentially lead to colluding with social, political and ecological exploitation and oppression. Likewise, to disregard the enriching immediacy that divine immanence can afford, not only risks further desacralization of an already burgeoning secularity, but inadvertently legitimizes exclusion, oppression and violence that the participatory turn is trying to address. Similarly, with his three-vector approach Daniels (2009) is advocating an integrative, complementary and encompassing approach to transpersonal psychology. In effect the answer to the 'weakness' or shadow of one vector is to be found in the 'strength' of the alternative vectors.

Collectively, my methodological approach integrating Transpersonal Awareness with IPA will support me to conduct my research interest in the following ways. Firstly, it equips me to legitimately explore heterosexual and LGBT C of E priests' human experience of their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Secondly, it supports me to seek out the personal, psychological and theological levels of meaning that my participants accord their experiences of mystical union with the divine through the veil of sexual ecstasy. Thirdly, by focusing upon my participants' thick descriptions and the relationships that emerge within the gathered data (rather than creating abstract concepts that inevitably involve a cause-and-effect mentality) I will aspire to respectfully substantiate this phenomenon with units of meaning that sincerely reflect their stories. Here, straddling the qualitative researcher qualities of empathy and suspicion will be essential to faithfully re-present my participants' stories and avoid hermeneutic harm. Fourthly, by holding all three philosophical vectors underpinning my transpersonal awareness I hope to substantiate the manner in which sacred sex emerges for my participants. Finally, my methodology compels me to relate to my

participants with curiosity about the internal perception of their experiences by embracing the rule of epoché or bracketing; along with the criticality that my own reflexivity will play in this regard, which I now discuss.

3.3 Researcher Bias and the Criticality of Reflexivity

Researcher bias is an inevitable factor to contend with when conducting qualitative research, particularly when the topic of enquiry has personal and professional resonance and meaning. This is particularly pertinent in my case. Denzin and Lincoln map out a myriad of ways in which the qualitative researcher's personhood, and therefore partiality, can infiltrate the research process:

[T]he personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective [and] approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways. (2013, p.23)

As I consider my personal biography as a researcher, it feels timely to clearly outline my position regarding the topic of enquiry dedicated to exploring the distinct relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Based on my personal experiences and professional interests spanning many years, I understand the archetypal energies of Eros (sexual impulse) and the Self (religious impulse) to be dialectical in nature (Jung, 1911-12/1952; TePaske, 2008). By this I mean that while sexual and spiritual passion are clearly different at an explicit or outward level of expression, at an implicit or phenomenological level of experience, they can nevertheless share an underlying or unifying process. This process involves a visceral sense of the dualistic categories such as time and space and self and other momentarily dissolving as a sense of the sacred or the Divine touches the participant(s). Such moments can bring a deep sense

of grace and transformation whereby the individual has an expanded and reinvigorated sense of self as one's relationship with others and the world becomes re-sacralized. I do not believe that everyone has these experiences, nor do I believe that such encounters are linked to spiritual dexterity or manipulation; rather, they are a gift of grace.

According to Silverman, a possible way of ameliorating my subjective predispositions, noted above, is “a technical matter where the researcher attempts to follow a protocol in order to limit bias” (2013, p.7). Reflexivity from this angle is seen as a further means of limiting one's own subjective assumptions from sidling into the research process. However, Moustakas (1975; 1990) innovatively argues that the researcher's bias, when linked to a reflexive disposition, can become an important bridge between researcher and participant. This bridge can thereby reveal what is essentially ‘concealed’ behind the veil of words that constitute the semi-structured interview. Here, “the basic idea concerns the *revelation of something hidden*, rather than the correspondence between subjective thinking and objective reality” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009, p.96 – italics in original). To my mind, this basic idea has a distinct interpretative and transpersonal quality to it in respect of the transpersonal researcher's receptivity, intuition and awareness.

Etherington brings important clarification about the hermeneutic gift that reflexivity can yield: “To be reflexive we need to be *aware* of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them” (2004, p.19 – italics in original). In a very distinct sense then, when my prior knowledge and experience on the topic of mystical union through sexual ecstasy is mindfully held through a reflexive attitude, this could

be a more exacting way of eliciting rich data. Adopting this researcher stance could lead to participants' revealing deeper, meaningful insights on this issue of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004). At this juncture it appears timely to bring into the equation *intuition* (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) which to my mind can be the product of a reflexive stance aspiring to bracket out the distractions from intentional objects of consciousness, to discern what sits beneath. Here it will be essential to embrace Heidegger's (1927/1962) attitude of 'an insider looking-out' posture to explore what it means for my participants to experience their distinctive relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Returning to Alvesson and Sköldberg, maintain that:

[O]nly intuition can fully assimilate the mental universe of another human being. In so far as this empathy is complemented by the interpreter's broader or at least different stock of knowledge, it is even possible – and this constitutes one of the main theses of hermeneutics – for interpreters to understand agents better than they understand themselves. (2009, p.93)

I now turn to a detailed account of the recruitment process, data collection and levels of analysis that were subsequently undertaken. As a way of demonstrating my reflexivity in action I will reflect upon these various stages of the research step by step.

3.4 The Participants

Given the current stalemate within the C of E regarding the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, particularly as this relates to LGBT clergy, it became advantageous to conduct a purposive or homogenous sample. According to Smith et al, (2009) a key rationale of an IPA methodology is to recruit, as far as possible, a homogenous sample. The justification here is that when uniformity is relatively achieved according to demographic factors "or other theoretical factors relevant to the

study, one can then examine in detail psychological variability within the group by analysing the pattern of convergence and divergence which arises" (ibid, p.50). The aim then, is to attempt to recruit those participants whose experiences are central to my investigation. In this regard, a purposive sample is desirable because it equips me to "purposively set out to recruit only those people who share the experience being investigated" (Langdridge, 2007, p.58).

Silverman (2013) rightly asserts that while purposive sampling allows qualitative researchers to illustrate or highlight some process or experience that interests them, they should not construe such a sample uncritically. "Rather, purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample case carefully on this basis" (p.148). This brings me to the decisive nature of the inclusion criteria being employed to gather a purposive sample. Firstly, it would be essential to enlist a significant number of actively serving C of E priests who identified as LGBT who were at odds with the Church's official position regarding the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy; alongside those heterosexual clergy who were sympathetic to their cause. Secondly, it would be essential to approach potential respondents who were writers, public speakers and campaigners on this topic to determine, as far as possible, their attitude, openness and willingness to engage with the sensitive nature of my research enquiry.

In the early stages of my research I did consider placing an open advertisement in The Church Times to recruit as many C of E clergy for my research as possible. However, after careful discussions with my academic advisor I appreciated that such a random

approach to sampling risked a plethora of respondents who experienced their sex and faith lives in parallel or disconnected terms. As I reflected further, given the contentious and vociferous nature that sexual and spiritual ecstasy has come to signify for the Church, I could also risk recruiting participants who were theologically opposed to the heart of my investigation. This could have resulted in countless time-consuming journeys with the possibility of pertinent data being unrealised. Hence, my rationale and inclusion criteria for a purposive sample explicated above. I now consider how this sampling choice informed my recruitment process.

3.4.1 The Recruitment Process

Given the sensitive nature of my proposed topic of enquiry, along with the added factor that some clergy may be unable to be publicly open about their sexual orientation for fear of repercussions, it felt important to access formal and legitimate channels of communication to assuage any concerns that my research might be a hoax. This point was so pertinent for Wade (2004) when she embarked on her seminal research into transcendent sex that she canvassed potential participants, face to face, at the end of her workshops and lectures on the very same topic. While I fully appreciate her more than justifiable rationale, it does nonetheless call into question issues of validity and reliability, given that she recruited participants who had attended her workshop presentations on the very topic she was investigating; namely, the unifying nature between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Notwithstanding, my own genuine concern that some of my potential participants might be fearful that my intended research was a deception or a ruse, it also felt essential to approach people I did not know to secure impartiality and strengthen the integrity of my findings.

My Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) email account was an essential means with which to send out an electronic version of my Participation Information sheet (Appendix A). By using my university email account and attaching the LJMU logo to the attached Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B) and the Participant Consent Form (Appendix C), I hoped to convey the legitimate nature of my request to counter any unforeseen anxiety. I also disclosed that in addition to being a researcher, I was also a C of E clergyman. I shared this information in the hope that this might convey, however tenuous, a sense of collegiality to further dispel any suspicion about the intent of my proposed research.

As I set out to recruit participants, I identified a number of C of E organisations who espoused an inclusive mission statement about fully integrating LGBT laity into the life of the Church. To my way of thinking, this allegiance signalled an important sympathy and compassion to non-heterosexual Christians that equally indicated something essential about that particular priest's relationship with their own sexual and spiritual impulses. In this way I was able to access members' emails that were already in the public domain and forwarded my Participation Information sheet, Demographic Questionnaire and Consent Form accordingly. I also searched through the weekly *Church Times* for articles and Letters to the Editor that sympathetically resonated with my own research. Letters to the Editor would invariably list the person's address. On these occasions I would send a paper mail out with the appropriate forms. I also laboured the point that if a potential participant wanted to proceed but preferred to hand both the Demographic Questionnaire and the Consent Form to me in person then this would be more than acceptable.

The recruitment process was laborious and challenging. It took almost three years before I managed to recruit five participants in readiness to compile and submit my MPhil thesis to gain registration as a PhD. At times I felt despondent. The delay between sending out numerous emails and paper mail outs and then receiving a response appeared lengthy. However, it also served as a reminder that my topic of enquiry was sensitive and deeply personal. It also helped me to exercise both patience and steadfastness in order to keep faith with the belief that this was timely and pioneering research, and that eventually enough people would respond.

I was once again reminded about the timely and sensitive nature of my research when one male participant emailed me back clearly in a state of fear, enquiring if we had previously met, and if not, how did I come to possess his email address. I profusely apologised for any concern that my email had caused. I reassured him that we had not met and reiterated that his email address had appeared on a C of E website, of which he was a member, promoting an inclusive church congregation. I conveyed to him that he did not have to engage with the research if he so wished. This level of reassurance and reiterating my initial email felt ethically and professionally necessary and appropriate. This helped me to further appreciate and respect Wade's (2004) decision not to enlist participants through electronic and paper mail outs. And, given the number of mail outs that I undertook I am somewhat surprised and gladdened that only one participant responded from a place of anxiety and concern.

Similarly, at the end of the research interview, 'George' (a pseudonym), laughingly told me that he had spoken with his Church Warden the night before about the impending

interview, who in confidence knew about his gay identity, declaring that: “Oh, well this person might be an undercover reporter and I could be splashed right across the front cover of The Sun newspaper tomorrow.” While he disclosed this in a jocular manner I could not help but wonder about the level of fear and stress that some LGBT clergy have to endure in the current climate whereby the C of E continues to place hostility between sexuality and spirituality. Another gay priest, ‘Grant’ (a pseudonym), returned his Demographic Questionnaire and his Consent Form prior to the interview, marking his sexual orientation as heterosexual. During the interview he disclosed that he had a boyfriend which completely threw me. Grant’s designation of himself could of course been down to human error and may not be significant. Nevertheless, it was important to reflect on this. I concluded that these exchanges were an aide-mémoire about the delicate and complex nature of my research and to proceed respectfully and sensitively. These examples also helped me to appreciate afresh the generosity and good will of my participants to partake in this research.

3.4.2 Participant Details

In total, twenty-two C of E clergy agreed to participate in the research. My twenty-two participants consisted of seven women and fifteen men. Two of the seven women identified as women who have successfully transgendered from male to female. In terms of sexuality, four of the women categorised themselves as heterosexual, two as bisexual and one as lesbian. The fifteen men comprised of four heterosexual men, eleven gay men and one man who described his sexuality as a latent bisexual man. Twenty-one participants were in a consummated relationship, with one participant, a bisexual female priest, identifying as celibate. The age of the participants interviewed

spanned across the 21-30 to 71-80 age range: seventeen of the participants spread across the 41-70 age range. In respect of ethnicity twenty-one participants recorded themselves as White British, with one participant, a female heterosexual priest, identifying as Mixed British/African. Finally, in terms of churchmanship respondents described their approach as Liberal, Modern, Progressive, Inclusive, Moderate, Radical, Ecumenical and Anglo-Catholic. I have chosen not to disclose the exact age of my participants nor the year of their ordination to the diaconate and priesthood as a further measure to protect their privacy and confidentiality. For ease, I have compiled a table (Table 1) of my participants below. Instead of referring to their sexual orientation, particularly when it comes to the chapter on results and the discussion, I have designated each one with a pseudonym that resonates with their sexual orientation. So, H for heterosexual, L for lesbian, G for gay, B for bisexual, or in the case of my two transgender respondents T; and L-B for my Latent-Bisexual male participant.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

C of E Clergy Pseudonyms	Gender	Age Bracket	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Current Relationship Choice	Churchmanship
(1) Harriet	Female	51-60	White English/British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Liberal & Ecumenical Approach
(2) Helen	Female	51-60	Non-White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Anglo-Catholic
(3) Hannah	Female	51-60	White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Liberal Catholic
(4) Henry	Male	51-60	White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Broad/Liberal
(5) Hugh	Male	41-50	White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Middle Liberal
(6) Howard	Male	61-70	White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Modern/Moderate Catholic
(7) Hadley	Male	31-40	White British	Heterosexual	Opposite-Sex	Liberal Catholic
(8) Linda	Female	61-70	White British	Lesbian	Same-Sex	Liberal Anglo-Catholic
(9) George	Male	31-40	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	High Anglican/Anglo-Catholic
(10) Gabriel	Male	51-60	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Progressive Catholic Anglican
(11) Graham	Male	61-70	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Radical Contemplative
(12) Geoffrey	Male	61-70	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Liberal Catholic
(13) Gareth	Male	51-60	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Liberal Catholic
(14) Glen	Male	21-30	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Liberal Central/Catholic
(15) Greg	Male	41-50	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Modern Catholic
(16) Gregory	Male	51-60	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Progressive
(17) Grant	Male	41-50	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Inclusive
(18) Gerald	Male	71-80	White British	Gay	Same-Sex	Liberal Anglo-Catholic
(19) Beatrice	Female	61-70	White British	Bisexual	Celibate	Liberal/Radical Ex-Evangelical
(20) Leonard-Barry	Male	71-80	White British	Heterosexual/Latent Bisexual	Opposite-Sex	Liberal Anglican – All Spiritualities & Faiths
(21) Tess	Female: Transgendered Male to Female	61-70	White British	Heterosexual – was perceived as Gay before Transition	Opposite-Sex	Affirming Liberal Catholic
(22) Tamara	Transgendered Male to Female	41-50	White Irish	Bisexual	Same-Sex	Progressive & Moderate Catholic

The issues of anonymity and confidentiality were sacrosanct in order to gain informed consent and create a safe space for participants to reflect upon their distinct relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. I was keen to extol this in the research information pack and re-affirmed this message, face to face, prior to the interview commencing. Here, I reiterated the aim of the research: to explore the participant's sexual and spiritual experiences. I also reminded them that the recordings would be safely stored in a locked cabinet and any biographical details that might identify them would be anonymised to ensure confidentiality. I further added at the start of the interview process that if at any point they wanted to terminate the interview then that would happen and their recording would be duly erased. These time-honoured research protocols were essential to foster trust and a collaborative alliance. I also reiterated that if at any point my questions were uncomfortable or the cause of distress then we would terminate the interview process immediately and take time to reflect and talk things through. In this way I provided several opportunities to guard against participants becoming distressed or overwhelmed. While I have very clear boundaries about my various professional roles, I also felt reassured in myself that if someone did become distraught by the interview process, then my transferrable skills as a psychotherapist such as empathy, psychological containment and emotional regulation could be utilized without descending into role confusion as the researcher. Pleasantly, many of my participants thanked me for the opportunity to reflect and share their experiences and no distress was encountered or reported.

3.4.3 Ethical Considerations

In January 2010 I submitted a detailed application for ethical approval to LJMU Research Ethics Committee because my research involved human participants and the use of personal data. Due to my need to interview a significant sample to write-up my MPhil thesis before this becoming registered as a PhD, I submitted three ethical requests simultaneously. One for the MPhil and the remaining two ethical applications for two specific sample groups that would be interviewed after successfully passing my MPhil thesis. In all three applications I acknowledged that my research question and focus was sensitive and potentially embarrassing or distressing because it invited participants to reflect upon, explore and share, their deepest experiences of their sexual and spiritual ecstasy; with, in effect, a total stranger. I considered the ethical implications of this both for my participants and for myself.

With regard to my participants, the first resource I considered was that most C of E clergy have a relationship with a spiritual director who they meet with on a monthly basis for confidential spiritual guidance, psychological care and emotional support. Spiritual directors could be accessed if an emergency or crisis arose as a potential source of support if the interview proved too taxing or upsetting. Secondly, those participants who are recruited through such inclusive organisations affiliated with inclusive churches of the C of E have immediate access to a collegial web of support, if distressing experiences, associations or challenges emerged as a result of the semi-structured interview. This could be another indispensable recourse for support if needed in the aftermath of the research interview. Thirdly, as I briefly mentioned above I am a practising registered psychotherapist, with previous experiences of being a

parish priest and hospital chaplain working in the acute and mental health settings. Thus, I have a number of personal qualities and professional skills to draw upon to contain, regulate, support and pace the interview process should a participant become embarrassed or distressed – without losing my role as a participant-researcher or breaching ethical and professional principles.

The ethical implications that I further considered with my ethical application to LJMU Research Ethics Committee was in respect of my own safety. Again, given the potentially sensitive and personal nature of the research topic and interview process, I made a conscious decision to arrange my interviews within the participant's permission in the parish office, wherever possible. A majority of C of E clergy have an office away from their personal living space and invariably have secretarial support. Such a context would provide a professional and ethical container for the interview to take place by steering clear of the participant's personal living space and the Church building within which they conduct services of worship.

I was meticulous, if not a little unrelenting, in compiling my ethical research application because I was acutely aware of the deeply personal and sensitive nature of my research. As I reflect further, I can see how my previous professional roles as a parish priest and hospital chaplain, and currently my role as a psychotherapist are all heavily aligned with ethical codes and protocols about professional conduct (such as the principles of confidentiality and personal boundaries), which were indispensable in compiling my ethical application. Gratifyingly, I received full ethical approval without any recommendations.

3.4.4 Data Collection

An implication and challenge of the above was to compile a semi-structured interview that could elicit the much-needed data from my participants about their first-hand experiences of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, while simultaneously holding a respectful, inviting and non-intrusive stance. Several qualitative researchers (Smith, 2008; Willig, 2008) highlight the in-depth potential that a semi-structured interview affords to gather rich material from participants. The critical point here is the measured and incisive nature of the questions being asked, and that these questions are open-ended and non-directive. On average my interviews lasted for approximately 50 minutes. When constructing the semi-structured interview to collect the much-needed data, I had in mind the image of a funnel to guide my semi-structured interview. Here, I began with a set of broad and innocuous questions that gradually narrowed down to more intimate and precise questions to gain access into my respondents' experiences of their sexual ecstasy. Based on my recursive literature review I also included readings from the erotic poetry of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila, which I read out aloud to stimulate reflection and invite disclosure about this intimate part of their embodied experience. In addition, I presented a *coniunctio* picture to all of my participants that resonated with their own sexual orientation, which was discussed as a contentious issue within Jungian psychology in the previous chapter.

As a consequence of my ruminations, I commissioned a local artist to paint a heterosexual (Figure 1), a lesbian (Figure 2) and a gay (Figure 3) *coniunctio*, respectively. In my discussions with the artist I explained my intention to use these images for a piece of research. I described how I hoped that each picture would

communicate, between a man and a woman, two women and two men, a coming together of opposites. I noted such polarities as heaven and earth, and spirituality and sexuality which he could immediately resound with, and so he set to work. In procedural terms when it came to the interview, for example, if a participant identified as bisexual woman then I would present the heterosexual *coniunctio* and lesbian *coniunctio* to reflect her sexual orientation.

The rationale for including visual images within the semi-structured interview is that symbolic representations occupy a third space “between body and spirit: the world of imagination, a world in which images are real, imaginal not ‘imaginary’ (Johnson, 2010 p167). In Jungian analysis this third space is both transitional and transformative, and is referred to as “the *temenos*, the sacred space between the inner psychological reality and outer material reality” (ibid, p.167 – italics in original). Wagner further justifies my inclusion of visual artefacts because the world of things, he argues, is never just about things. Rather, visual materials are imbued with symbolic significance for both scholars and lay people alike, depending upon their socio-cultural frame of reference which the respondents occupy. These objects of visual enquiry can elicit “[i]deals for judging beauty, fairness, power, religiosity, and other such matters” (ibid, 2011, p.72).

Figure 1: A Heterosexual Coniunctio

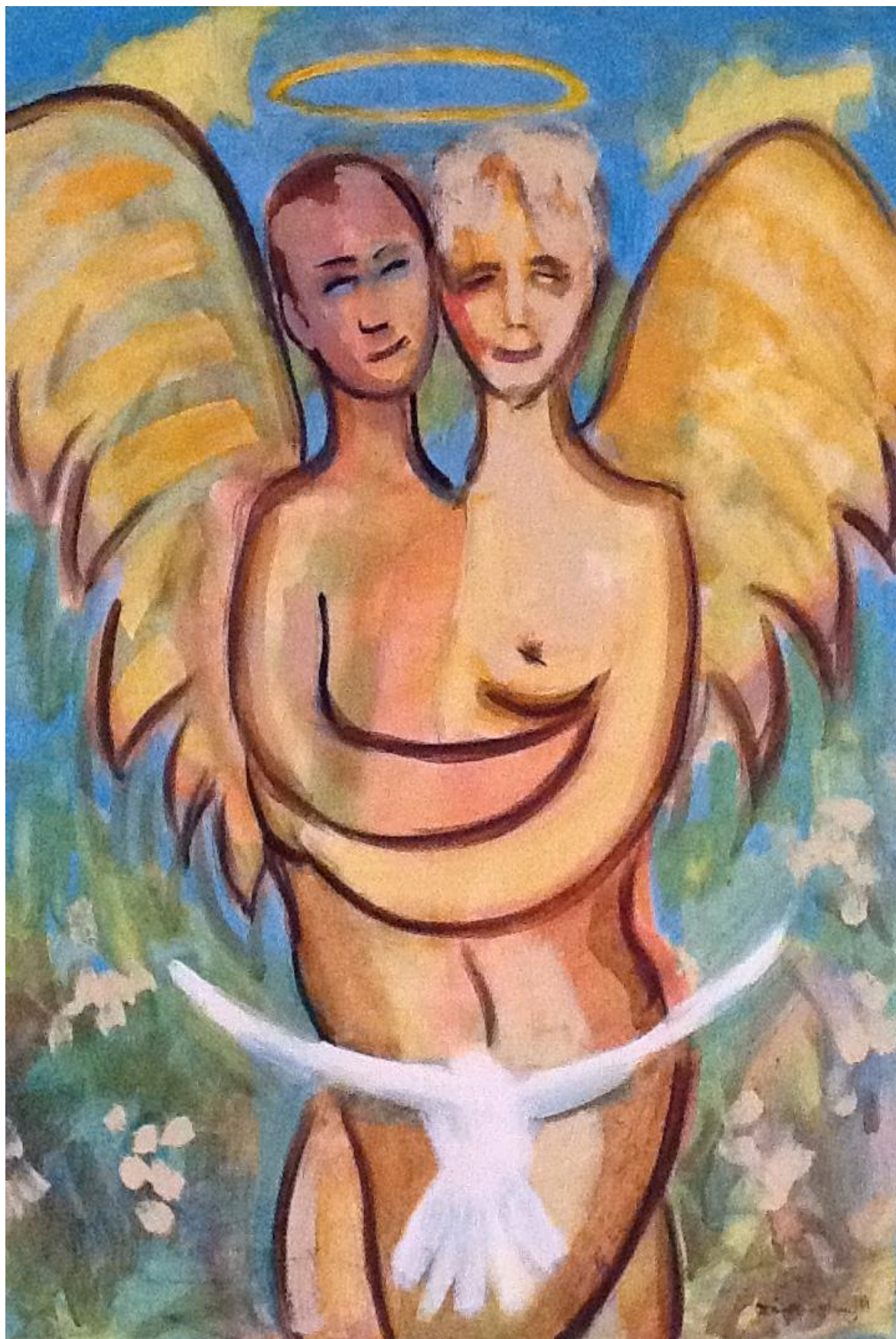
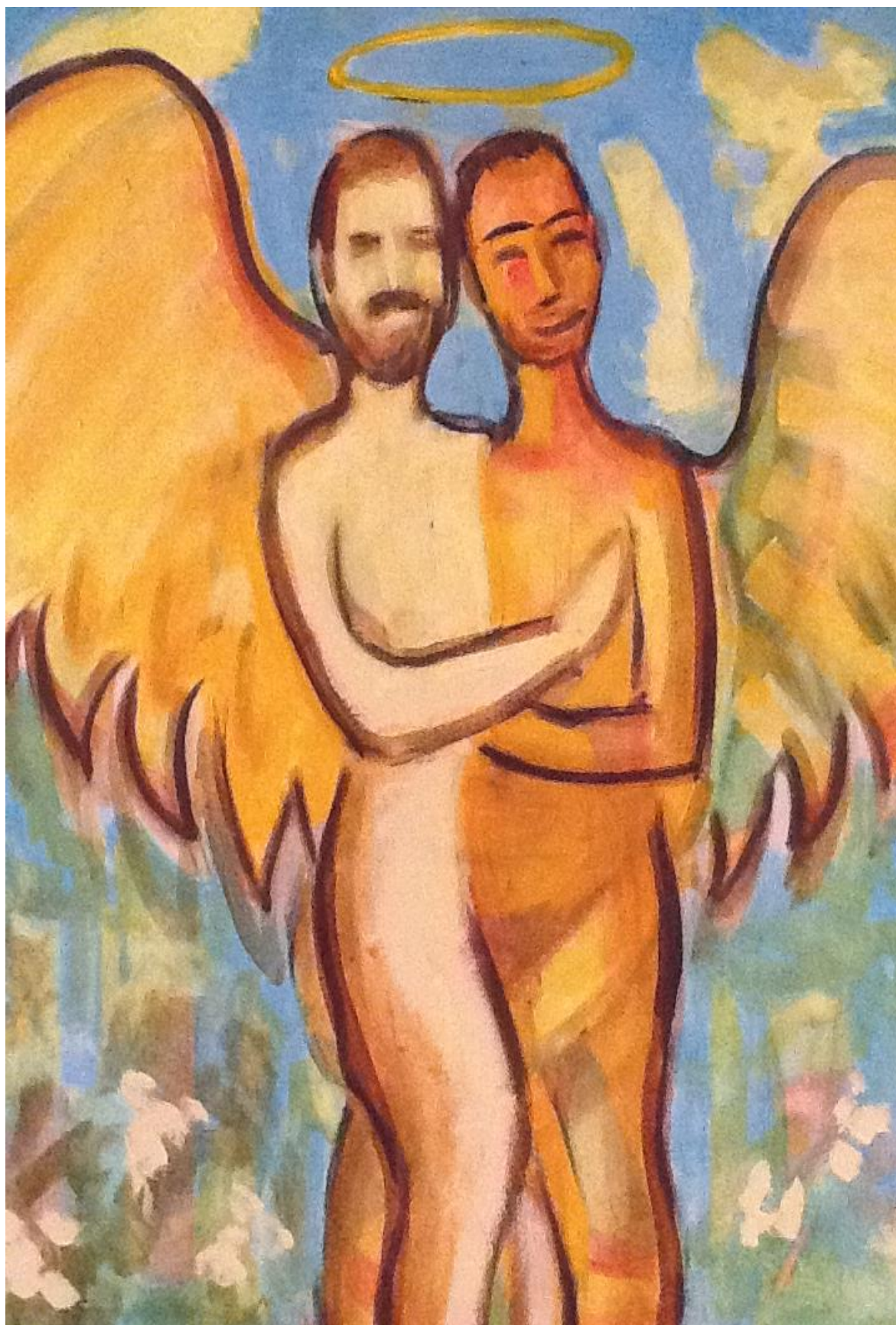


Figure 2: A Lesbian Coniunctio



Figure 3: A Gay Coniunctio



As I reflect further about the inclusion of erotic poetry from the Christian mystics, I felt reassured that this could be a good way of constellating and eliciting my participants' mystical experiences of their sexual ecstasy, in a respectful and collaborative way. The pictorial compilations of the three versions of the *coniunctio* was a fascinating process. There was a lengthy process after the initial discussions with the artist, including a return visit after his first attempt, with further consultation. He rightly wanted to check that the first rudimentary portrayals were heading in the 'right' direction. When he had completed the three pictures he invited me to his studio and had set out the three pictures on three separate easels with the heterosexual *coniunctio* in the middle and the two men and two women flanked on either side. My first impression was that it resembled a religious triptych. My next visceral response was to react to the dove, often symbolised as the Holy Spirit as the third person of Holy Trinity, hovering over the genitalia of the heterosexual couple. My internal response was to muse that this was indeed the Church's stance: the blessing and sanctification of heterosexual marriage but not same-sex relationships. This could of course be mere artistic license on the part of the artist and nothing more. I did enquire about his thinking for placing the dove in front of the male and female, to which he replied that he had been perfecting how to paint a dove for many years but never had the opportunity to use it in one of his paintings. I wondered what reactions the dove might elicit from my participants.

3.5 Data Collection and Levels of Analysis

While Smith et al. (2009) encourage qualitative researchers to apply the IPA methodology flexibly, it was nevertheless important to follow some key protocols espoused to maintain my research intent and rigour. The first stage was to interpret

line by line the particular meaning that each participant was apportioning to their experience. Any ideas of superordinate themes and subthemes were held in abeyance at this stage of analysis, as a way of staying focused upon the participants' lived experiences. My initial interpretations were placed in the first right hand column of the written transcripts. I would return to these transcripts several times being mindful to hold the middle ground between the researcher stance of empathic immersion and suspicious curiosity (Willig, 2012). In this way I aspired to ensure a faithful exegesis of my participants' experiences and guard against interpretative violence. What also assisted me during this iterative process of reviewing each transcript was to follow a simplified version of transcription conventions to denote: emphatic expressions; particular words that were said loudly; and, the length of pauses during the participant's speech (Appendix D). This helped me decipher and stay close to my participant's meaning-making.

Once these levels of analysis had been completed I then began to revisit the transcripts to identify salient themes that were emerging and place these within the second right hand column. Having followed the initial protocols advocated by Smith et al. (2009), I then began to creatively use colour to assist in the organisation of recurring themes across all twenty-two transcripts. So, for example, I used red to highlight sexual experiences, light blue to capture spiritual experiences and the impact of this, green to refer to God being experienced in nature, and purple to highlight mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy. This later level of analysis supported me to begin to organise any given participant's transcript into rich pieces of text with which to answer my research question, gradually revealing significant superordinate themes

and subthemes in terms of unique clusters of relationship. Please, see Appendix E for an example of this.

During my first research interview I endeavoured to hold fast to Heidegger's (1927/1962) principle of bracketing to maintain 'an insider looking-out' position to explore what it means for my participants to experience their distinctive relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. While this was in part upheld, I noticed that at times the interaction between researcher and participant became dialogical, placing us in a co-researcher relationship. I think in part this was due to moments of interest or connection about particular topics or issues that arose. I also think that as a psychotherapist, dialogue is at the heart of a relational therapeutic practice. I noted that this could be problematic with the participant not becoming the sole focus of exploration. My internal research supervisor made an important note to monitor this and I resolved to stay more faithful to Heidegger's principle.

3.5.1 Issues of Validity and Reliability

McLeod (2011) notes that "the major challenge for qualitative researchers has been the struggle to establish agreement over the criteria which are to be applied when making judgements over the quality of a piece of research" (p.265). This is in part due to the personal involvement of the research investigator which I have addressed above. In sharp contrast quantitative research has specific measurements such as validity, reliability, sampling and statistical power for the research project to be replicated by an external evaluator. Yardley (2000, cited in Smith et al., 2009) has highlighted several procedures that need to be privileged by qualitative researchers to

ensure validity and reliability. The first of these she designates as sensitivity to the unique contextual milieu of the researcher-participant encounter. Hence, “showing empathy, putting the participant at ease, recognizing interactional difficulties, and negotiating the intricate power-play where research expert may meet experiential expert” (p.180) is at the heart of the data collection process. The second procedural knowledge that Yardley names is commitment and rigour. Commitment is understood as an in-depth and prolonged period of time dedicated to the area of study and commitment to exploring participants’ “experience of the lifeworld, which is at the core of all phenomenological inquiry” (Langdrige, 2007, p.107). She highlights rigour as signifying a distinct thoughtfulness about the appropriateness of the sample, the careful compilation of a semi-structured interview to extrapolate the data needed, and the interview and analytical skills to trustworthily gather and re-present participants’ phenomenological experiences. Finally, McLeod succinctly argues that “it seems to me that the personal qualities of the researcher, his or her integrity, courage, honesty and commitment to the task of inquiry, actually make a difference” (2011, p.280) to the validity and reliability of a significant piece of research. I sincerely hope that I have addressed and aspired to capture these qualitative characteristics to ensure validity and reliability.

I decided to enlist the support of Janice Osgood, as a Critical Research Friend, to independently interpret and analyse the seventh interview that had been recorded and transcribed. The seventh interview took place shortly after my MPhil research had been transferred and registered as a PhD project. So, in a distinct sense my researcher style had already begun to form and take shape. Janice has a breadth and depth of knowledge regarding Transpersonal psychology and was engaged in her own

doctoral studies using an IPA methodology. She kindly agreed to undertake this task on my behalf.

My rationale for this was twofold: firstly, this process would be a helpful yardstick to compare my own analysis of the same transcript as a way of determining whether my own subjectivity was being used in the service of interpretation or being unduly exercised, fostering a collusive bias; secondly, if it transpired that I was, as far as is humanly possible, faithfully interpreting this participant's lived experience, by occupying the middle ground between empathy and suspicion and using my antennae of transintentionality, then this would be a further measure of ensuring validity and reliability. I have placed my own analysis and Janice's analysis of the same transcript as Appendices E and F within this thesis. This would seem to suggest that I was indeed faithfully keeping close to my participant's experience, as well as uncovering his mystical experiences that have emerged from his same-sex erotic love-making and his erotic ecstasy.

Chapter 4: Results

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will present the salient themes and sub-themes that have gradually emerged through the iterative process of visiting and re-visiting the transcribed transcripts from twenty-two participants. The participants' rich descriptions (Richards, 2009) or thick descriptive data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) have been subjected to the double hermeneutic advocated by Smith et al. (2009) and integrated with a Transpersonal Awareness. This integration has supported me to foster an attitude of transintentionality (Vale and Mohs, 1998) in order to discern and interpret those mystical experiences that are given or emerge as pure consciousness or transcendent awareness. Once again, a pseudonym will be used to describe each participant's responses and experiences, and this will correspond with their sexual orientation, or in the case of the two transgendered respondents', the letter T will be most apposite. Hence, pseudonyms beginning with H stand for heterosexual, L for lesbian, G for gay, B for bisexual, L-B for latent bisexual and T for transgendered. The key superordinate themes are: The Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy; Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy and the Aftereffects; the Heterosexual, Gay and Lesbian *Coniunctio*; and the House of Bishops and the C of E Hierarchy. We now turn to these superordinate themes in turn and highlight any significant accompanying subthemes under each key theme to deepen this data analysis. (Please see Appendix G for a simple overview of these superordinate themes and subthemes).

4.1 THEME ONE: The Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy

4.1.2 Introduction

This superordinate theme relates to how participants theologically and psychologically understood their relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. After various levels of analysis were undertaken, what emerged was that a majority of the participants attested to a dialectical frame of reference when considering the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. While this 'both-and' perspective was a dominant theme for twenty of the twenty-two participants, eight of these twenty participants' felt that they had yet to fully experience the sacred through ecstatic love-making. They attributed this to various historical or ongoing challenges that together have prevented them from fully realising this possibility in their own sex and faith lives. I discuss these eight participants' in detail during the second superordinate theme that follows, under the subheading 'Barriers to Experiencing *Unio Mystica* through Sexual Ecstasy'. The remaining 2 respondents experienced their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in dualistic or parallel terms. I discuss their contribution to this research as a key subtheme later in this section. By addressing this superordinate theme and the accompanying sub-theme, it will be important to faithfully re-present how the participants described and articulated the unitary nature of their sexual and spiritual ecstasy; and the two participants who did not. In this regard I am mindful of teasing out the personal nuance that each participant attributes to this relationship, in the service of complexity and as a way of ensuring the dependability of the data analysis being offered.

4.1.3 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: A Dialectical Relationship

Hadley's visceral response to the erotic love poetry of St. John of the Cross was deeply personal, revealing a complete alignment with his psychological and theological worldview and his direct religious experience. He resonated with the text in a quiet and yet powerful way:

"I relate to it completely and it's beautiful, absolutely beautiful, and for me one way I might describe some of my religious experience. I think it's courageous."

Immediately afterwards, Hadley, effortlessly linked his religious reverberations with his human experiences, commenting that:

"It is very intimate and it quite clearly, I think, makes a connection in the reader's mind between human relationship and the relationship with God."

Shortly after this point he was acutely aware that for him to speak or preach about the unitive nature of sexual and spiritual ecstasy would be for some Christians, including his own parishioners, offensive:

"I would imagine that it would step over the line for some people."

When it came to St. Theresa of Avila's erotic love poetry, Hadley had an opposite reaction stating that:

"It's gone beyond surrender to martyrdom. It's no longer, the relationship, the power dynamic has tipped too far the other way and sexually we're heading towards rape if you like, as opposed to sexual union ... gone too far but not because of the sexual flavour of the writing, but because of the actual actions it depicts."

Clearly, for Hadley, mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy is not something that should be inflicted. St. Theresa's highly-spirited and forceful use of erotic language, supported him to reveal that for him, the unitary nature of sex and spirit are

communicated through a loving encounter with God and a significant human being; rather than this being violently forced upon the recipient either sexually by a human being, or spiritually by a divine Being. He notes:

"I'm more of Gentle Jesus knocking on the door, but never knocking it in!"

Like Hadley, Grant also wondered about the threat of pain that might be inflicted upon the recipient who has an intense mystical union with God when considering St. Theresa's ecstatic words: "So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks that I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same". Unlike Hadley, Grant wonders if there might be a gift in this pain.

"Something as intense as that, which does involve pain, you would want there to be a kind of voluntary acquiescence in it. So, there's a slight sense in that last sentence of someone, in a sense, being forced to experience it. I heard that last statement as a kind of mixture of threat and gift."

Gareth was also impacted by St. Theresa's words "the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God" and how this signified for him a spiritual and physical sense of intercourse between St. Theresa and God.

"The colloquies of love ... is another way of saying intercourse. It is that two-way communication of a unique depth that, yes, colloquy of love, yeah: it's a very, very deep expression of the physical."

Upon hearing St. Theresa erotic ruminations of her encounter with God, Henry exclaimed:

"It's so explicitly erotic! And, it's wonderful and it is how things should be! Human love: love of God and love of Neighbour. At its simplest they should go completely together and it should be part of the same thing."

In a similar vein, Howard positively responded to the interpenetrating relationship that can be exercised between the erotic and the mystical, which St Theresa's highly charged experience seemingly extols, when he said:

"Spiritual orgasms: wonderful! I can completely relate to that!"

He qualifies this further by declaring that for him sexual and spiritual ecstasy are both about being in touch with one's true identity as sexual *and* religious beings. In effect, for Howard, sexual and spiritual bliss strips away the layers of persona or psychic inflations that have accumulated and transpired over the years. Howard explains:

"Somewhere for me it is all about authenticity. It's all about being real. It's not being confined by role or by adaptations ... It's about being truly oneself at a core level."

So, for Howard sexual and spiritual ecstasy are united in their ability to peel back the vestiges of the past and remove the business of the day to expose our true essence as sex and spirit. This is the authenticity that Howard wants to encourage and celebrate.

On this point, and as a result of his own sex and faith journey, along with appreciating the homoerotic undertones of his Evangelical upbringing, Gregory now rejects the dualistic inferences embedded in the Christian mystics' poetry. Instead, he encourages parishioners to relate from their authentic self because for him, Christ and God are already present in that place. This perspective resonates with Howard's experiences: that sex and spirit remove the trivialities of the day and help the individual to live their life from a place of greater and deeper authenticity.

It is interesting to note, that Leonard-Barry is also suspicious about the dualistic undertones of St. Theresa because he detects a Cartesian-dualism that leans towards making our relationship with God the highest hallmark; which in effect relegates our worldly-experiences as, at least, a second-best copy of the 'real thing'. His wariness on this front is borne out of his reflections on St. Theresa's spiritual and physical orgasmic moans.

"Orgasm and the power of that, physically and metaphorically, and a bit of it feels as though it's limiting. It feels like it's being tied down to God again and I'm more and more aware of that now than I once was, that as Christians, particularly, we seem to split so much between ourselves and God: us being bad and God being good, that I'm a bit wary of excluding or being exclusive around God, as I think I hear her doing. Somehow making the relationship with God the best. Whereas my God isn't about a hierarchy of spiritual excellence or whatever."

I got a distinct sense of the relational-participatory turn (Ferrer, 2011) in Leonard-Barry's approach to the sacred.

In line with the male participants above, Henry is keen to vigorously underscore the inter-relationship between sexual and spiritual passion in a non-dualistic manner, and he punctuates his response with a cogent polemic towards those people who want to separate these unifying human experiences:

"That holding together is marvellous because we have got to the stage with Freud and afterwards that all religion is meant to be sublimated sex; and some people think that of sex, as sublimated religion. Actually, they've just got to be together, but you do tend to get the either/or. So, someone might read that (St. Theresa of Avila) and say, she was someone who was frustrated sexually, experiencing something with God. It's not at all. They go absolutely together, ideally hand-in-hand: our physical and our spiritual."

This leads Henry to reflect upon his ministry as a parish priest. How in particular he wished he had the courage to address the teenage Choir boys during the Sunday

Eucharist, when they would invariably need to hold themselves together during stifled giggles as they sang “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

“I’d wish I’d had the courage sometimes to say when I saw some of our choir boys sniggering, when they sang “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”. I wished I said ... if you were in a context of a really loving relationship that would be, “Coming in the Name of the Lord”.

This line from the Eucharistic Prayer is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (21: 9) and signifies the Godly status conferred upon Jesus of Nazareth as the much longed for Messiah. The Jewish crowd repeatedly shout or sing this greeting to him, while waving palm branches, as Christ enters the City of Jerusalem riding on a donkey. In this way, Henry links and integrates the spiritual meaning of “Coming in the name of the Lord” with sexual orgasm. In this way he aptly reiterates how he comprehends sexual and spiritual bliss as an interrelated experience. This dynamic understanding about the relationship between sexual and spiritual bliss is further revealed when Henry responds to the erotic love poetry of St John of the Cross:

“It’s beautiful. That’s about being transported. All the cares go and the loss, and the total focus on someone who loves you so much, it takes you out of yourself and again that absolute love for someone.”

Henry seamlessly moves, and ostensibly with great ease, between spiritual transcendence and sexual bliss, thereby revealing his theological frame of reference and his psychological predisposition to being receptive to a mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy.

After several seconds of silent reflection, upon hearing the poetry of St. John of the Cross, Hannah connected with St. John laying on God’s chest with motherhood.

“Complete absorption, closeness and it reminded me of a little bit of being a mother of very small children that sense of having a small child fall asleep on you, that closeness you tend to synchronise your breathing.”

I was captivated by the way in which Hannah made a powerful connection with synchronising her bodily breathing with a small child sleeping on her chest as a mother, based on the erotic and spiritual undertones of St. John of the Cross’ poetry. Upon hearing his poetic language, Helen, was immediately visibly charged with mental and emotional memories as she recalled her relationship with her son when he was a child:

“That’s lovely, what that made me think of was being with my child and moments of connectedness.”

These two compelling examples seem to highlight, once again, the inextricable link between human and divine intimacy. Helen, did not see the erotic language employed by St. John in the narrow sense of the word, as sex or homoerotic desire, but in its broadest sense, as love:

“I don’t feel that it’s actually homoerotic language for me it isn’t. For me it’s sort of, its parent language, its love language it’s not in any way sexual or anything it is a connection language you can have with some people not just with your children. It does not come across to me as a sexuality language at all, it’s a sort of love language.”

This reminded me of Jung’s (1911-12/1952) all-encompassing definition of Eros to include passion and desire in its broadest sense as well as in its specific sense to indicate sexual libido.

Upon hearing the poem from St. John, after a long silence of reflection and thoughtfulness, Linda responds in the following way:

"Yes, well obviously there's spiritual aspects in there and there's sexuality and erotic aspects in there. And the two, a lot of the time I think, the two are indistinguishable. Beautiful!"

When describing her sexual experiences with her female lover, she notices that such encounters help her forget herself and then chuckles as she explains that ultimately:

"Yeah (quietly chuckles), it becomes neither one nor the other but both really. A bit indistinguishable."

The term *indistinguishable* would appear to be indicative of both her direct experiences of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, which seemingly indicate that for Linda, these aspects are interrelated. Upon hearing St. Theresa's synergistic moans of heavenly and earthly delight, Linda's initial response is to question whether this resonated with her own spiritual and sexual experiences. This was particularly touching for Linda, given that she was a nun for some twenty-plus years and for the first time in her life she had recently consummated her sexuality in a lesbian relationship since she left the convent to work as a non-stipendiary priest. After further consideration she said:

"I've got a glimpse of an understanding. I can understand, I can understand how it could be. It's not totally without any sense for me, but I don't know I'd put my own experience in those kinds of terms."

It would seem that for Linda the terminology employed by St. Theresa did not register with her, rather than the idea of sexual and spiritual ecstasy being in a distinct and unique relationship. Nonetheless, in part she could find some self-reference with that of St. Theresa of Avila's experience. As she further considers the distinctive nature between sex and spirit, Linda is very insightful about the relational dynamic that binds these two components of human existence:

"Everything together, to me that makes perfect sense. And it's not the highpoint that you hit all the time, but just occasionally you do get experience, that amazing spark and it transforms your understanding of God and yourself, myself."

Gareth likewise holds sexual and spiritual ecstasy together by employing a powerful image to symbolize the coming together of the erotic and the sacred, as a way of registering his resonance with the medieval erotic love poetry of St. John:

"This is where the rubber hits the road and the rubber is erotic and the road is the spiritual. It gets us somewhere but we are not comfortable talking about it normally, because both things are usually very private. It's only on very rare occasions when a John of The Cross or a Teresa or a Michael Angelo expresses something spiritual in a way that is almost naughty. We know what they are talking about but they express it to God, so it's alright. Maybe that was the only way in which they could channel their erotic, the erotic in those ages."

He wonders about the Spanish Christian mystics' context and how they perhaps could only express their sexual longings through spiritual ecstasy. As he ponders on this point further, he then suddenly turns to his own context of homoerotic love-making, seeing this at once as a God-given gift and a blessing.

"Because I'm very aware that this is just the most amazing gift. I cannot stop thinking, I mean how blessed I am to (a) have an amazing relationship, (b) to live in a society where it's possible. Thank God we're not in Uganda or Saudi Arabia, or Iran, or anywhere else and we're able to be together and people know that we're together."

In this way Gareth appreciates that in his own contemporary context he is at liberty to integrate these two primary impulses of sex and spirit in his own life; and that for some people, they have been or are currently forced to deny and re-direct their sexual ecstasy in more socially acceptable ways. However, he is clear that experiencing the divine by going through the heightened veil of sexual ecstasy is a non-ordinary event that is both earth-shattering and rare.

"I mean it's ecstasy which is taking you out of yourself to a completely different place which is beyond the normal, beyond the ordinary, beyond the routine and it's a rare thing, a rare thing. Those moments of really great and high momentous climax, is something which is, doesn't happen so often as one would like, but you do remember those moments and those moments are very, very, significant in cementing relationships AND confirming who you are ... and the only people who are there are you, your partner and God, because God rejoices in joy and pleasure, and this is all about pleasure."

While Gerald is clear that St. John is exclusively reflecting upon his relationship with God, with no inference intended about this being reminiscent of a male lover, the text nevertheless compels him to announce:

"You get into God by feeling somebody else very close to you, whether it's male or female. Obviously when you are with a lover there is something Godly about it."

As an older, retired priest, he recalls that when he prepared a Christian couple for marriage or a same-sex couple for a blessing, he would go to extraordinary lengths to labour that their love was:

"Godly, and God had given them, what existed between them, and that they should realise that it was Him at work, not just something ordinary, it was Divine. So, St. John of the Cross was saying, this is divine this love, if it is another man, it comes from God. Well, where else would it come from, really?"

So, for Gerald his sexual and spiritual ecstasy are incontrovertibly in a unified relationship, rather than an oppositional one.

A younger priest, Glen, comprehends St. John's poetry as an elaborate account of how he feels enveloped by God during a heightened spiritual experience. While he does not identify with the details of St. John's experience, he initially appreciates that this might speak to other gay men. However, shortly afterwards he significantly discloses:

"But, God sleeping on his chest, I mean I think that's lovely and I think that speaks to me of the Incarnation, of the intimacy that God shares our form with us and walked with us, and for me, that sort of goes with the powerful image of John 1: 'The word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. That pitching the tent among us and that image of God lying on our chest that work's quite well for me."

So, while the finer details of St. John of the Cross's erotic vision do not accord with Glen's experiences, he nevertheless, based on his own familiarities of gay sexual ecstasy, understands his faith and sex life to be in unison. Indeed, how the former can realign and re-calibrate his Christian faith.

"It's very sort of raw, simple, primal, encounter, and since we hold very strongly that we're created in God's image and function as we do with God as the Creator of all that we are, then there is a sense in which that moment (gay love-making) aligns us in some way with the faith that we hold."

He qualifies this further by saying that we can project lots of theological ideas and metaphors onto the gay sexual act but during the actual act itself it is a much more visceral and pre-cognitive experience:

"I think we can project some lovely ideas into the sexual act and to a certain extent I can understand some of those feelings, but I think the reality often is, none of these things go through one's head at the time."

Reflecting upon the poetry of St. Theresa, Grant exhibits a powerful identification with the erotic and sexual component of her vision as this relates to his sexual experiences of anal intercourse as a gay man.

"There's a fear of pain and so a sense of dread, and longing that go together, because one would be fearful of the pain as it's described, spiritual, physical, but also I would want to have the intensity of love for the divine that is described there. So, a feeling of awe, mixed with fear and longing, as well. I mean clearly the imagery is of being penetrated in a way that is both painful and pleasurable and that has very strong links to erotic experience doesn't it, and fantasy, erotic fantasy."

What is fascinating here, is the way in which St. Theresa's opulent use of erotic imagery leads Grant to make these powerful associations, both physically and spiritually, in terms of anal intercourse and being penetrated by God, respectively.

As Greg wonders about his relationship to his sexual and spiritual ecstasy he is aware that after many years of careful reflection he has come to realise that when he desires younger or older beautiful men, it is a deep longing for the divine, and what he has experienced in the best of relationships, not just sexually, but on other levels too, can also give him a glimpse of God. They are both closely aligned in his experience and sometimes pangs of lust might be misdirected longings for communion with Christ or God. He goes on to explain this further:

"Sexual passion or urge or desire is a desire for the Divine and also within relationships, in a sexual relationship, there is a glimpse of the Divine in that at its best. There might not be because not all sex is great sex and if this is so then I think the element that is missing is that real sense of connection. Something clicks in that and that's not always found but when it is I'm sure that's a glimpse of the Divine as well."

Looking back on his journey from getting married, to becoming divorced and then coming to terms with his same-sex desire as a gay man, Gregory has a powerful association about his earlier Evangelical upbringing and identity, after listening to St. John's erotic poetry.

"As I look back I'm astonished at the level of unconscious homoerotic discourse that Evangelicals play out in 'Inviting the Lord Jesus into my heart' and to 'Live with me every moment and eat with me and sleep with me'. I'm having a flash back to my emerging sexuality and actually sensing that it can't all be bad. There's something homoerotic about the way in which Evangelicals conduct their conversation. Their allegiance to this clearly male figure: love and devotion, and singing and praise, and awe and wonder, and astonishment, and giving your life unreservedly to Him and feeling Him, and hearing Him, and talking ... and everything. It's about, Him, Him, Him!"

This seems to suggest that, at least for Gregory, his sexual ecstasy was denied and sublimated into his fervent faith as an Evangelical Christian and priest, before coming to terms with his sexuality. In the meantime, the implicit homoerotic discourse spoke to him, at some out of awareness level, and since completing his sexuality as a gay man he now holds these two components of his being in a dialectical relationship.

On a similar note, Harriet, remembered that in her teenage years and in her early twenties, she was involved in Charismatic worship communities and was acutely aware about the erotic undertones attached to many of the hymns:

“When I was a teenager and in my early twenties, in more charismatic worship, generally, you would sing those sorts of songs they would sing and people were saying, in many ways, that they can be very erotic songs. Looking back on that time being perhaps, a bit more cynical about it, and a bit more: ‘What is going on there?’”

As Harriet considered this further she felt that such hymns were designed to make worshippers over-emotional and that the intention of these songs of praise were:

“Over-manipulative: whipping-up things. I mean the song which is going through my head is, ‘Jesus take me as I am I can come no other way’, which originally was, ‘Take my flesh-life’ and then ‘Take my self-life’. ‘Take me deeper into you, make me like a precious stone, like crystal clear and finely honed, life of Jesus shining through, giving glory back to you’.”

Harriet’s analysis of the erotic undertones of the songs of praise which she believed to be manipulative with the sole design of heightening spiritual emotions, reminded me of Bourgeault’s (2010) myth number two, which she heavily critiques: (2) that love of God and love of another human being will divide the heart. Hence, perhaps the exclusive direction of spiritual ecstasy being stimulated and exclusively directed towards God, that Harriet remembered and testified to. My association with Bourgeault’s myth

number two, is perhaps justified in the light of what Harriet disclosed after listening to St. Theresa of Avila:

"In one sense it encourages me to think that God has made us as spiritual, sexual beings and therefore, this is good and they came to emphasise that when it's just not emphasised. Over the years I can remember reading different articles where we pick up our different messages. I might just love God, hopeless, and the way it's all constrained."

Upon hearing St. John's erotic and spiritual poetry Leonard-Barry emotionally responds with quiet immediacy, in the following way:

"Comforting, recognisable, hopeful. I don't know what it is about him that I've always been drawn to, really before I knew who he was."

When reading St. John of the Cross long before he was ordained, Leonard-Barry, felt confirmed sexually and spiritually in his very being both:

"It seemed to me, yes, that here was my sexuality being confirmed and very much included, really."

The unitary way in which Leonard-Barry organises his psychological and theological frame of reference when considering the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy becomes crystallized after viewing first, the heterosexual *coniunctio* and then secondly, the gay *coniunctio*.

"That (gay coniunctio) would sum up a lot of my sense about the Holy not being exclusive but incorporating, holding together, celebrating. Yes, there is a celebration about these two which I didn't pick up about the other one, particularly (heterosexual coniunctio). Perhaps nearer in making love. Very affirming!"

In a distinct sense, as a latent-bisexual man, he clearly views his sex and spirit in integrated terms rather than a dichotomous one, and the gay *coniunctio* seems to elicit this response and affirm his experience and worldview.

Tess responds incisively to St. John's medieval mystical poetry, having read this Christian mystic many times before. She initially makes associations with the text and then spells out the human and divine nature of love and intimacy. She also links such experiences to both pain and growth.

"Intimacy. Meditation on the Song of Songs. The erotic or physical aspect of love and intimacy is a metaphor for the love between God and humanity: human and Divine. The thing about the neck, in one way its disturbing because the neck is a vulnerable part of our anatomy, especially with the arteries. There's almost pain and pleasure, or pain and growth."

However, Tess, feels compelled to qualify her thoughts on this further, and in particular her need to underline that God can be experienced in the heightened moments of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and in the ordinariness of everyday life.

"Ecstasy, the ecstatic part of it is enjoyable and obviously the ecstatic can be part of our connection with God. But the connection with God is often expected in those terms, in terms of the senses, but that's what's good about St. John. He reminds us that actually the deeper connection may not be the ecstatic bit, the orgasmic bit – the oceanic bit, because that's quite orgasmic too, but more mundane too!"

Tamara also makes an important link between her sexual and spiritual impulses, noting how St. John's poem connects her with that feeling of spiritual transcendence or being taken out of one's self during sexual bliss:

"Well that this the sort of spirituality I can relate to very much so losing yourself in the moment."

She qualifies this further by reflecting upon the process she has experienced when engaging in same-sex erotic relationships.

"If it's me focussing on my partner or if it's me receiving, it is like being lost in the moment. I can't focus on anything else. My current experience has been with women and often being taken out of myself, the sexual process feels surreal."

4.1.4 Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy: A Dualistic Relationship

Helen, however, would appear to comprehend and experience her sexual and spiritual ecstasy differently to the majority of other participants. Reflecting on one of her direct experiences of rapturous sexual ecstasy, she vividly recalls the impact of melting, merging and becoming one with her lover. This was powerfully re-membered during the interview as she talked about this experience.

“It’s that melting into something else. I do remember, it wasn’t with my husband, it was a long time ago. I do remember (I can still feel it) it was a sort of melting together. There wasn’t a you and there wasn’t a him. We were almost sinking into each other. It was lovely. Melting. A real merging together. A real oneness, and I wouldn’t say it’s similar to that experience with God because God is more about being worshipped.”

While Helen clearly differentiates her experiences of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, it is interesting to note that after this point during the interview when revisiting the issue, she describes them in the following way:

“They are similar”

Furthermore, when reflecting upon her experience of spiritual ecstasy earlier in the interview she described these rare and fleeting moments in the following way:

“On those very rare occasions you become one with the Divine, you become part of it: you feel that you and the Divine are connected. I think you are not there. It’s not you. You are not there. There is no differentiation. No, and I sort of feel. My hope is that when we die that is the sense of being with the Divine, that you are just there, but not you.”

What is interesting about juxtaposing these different definitions of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, is the poignant parallels that can be detected as Helen describes each in turn. The key words of *melting*, *merging* and *oneness* (sexual ecstasy) and *becoming one with the Divine*, *connected*, and *being there with God without any differentiation*

(spiritual ecstasy), uncannily echo each other. I was also fascinated by the word *connected* which Helen used to describe her relationship with her son when he was a child, that was evoked after listening to the erotic love poetry of St. John. Clearly there may be some confusion here or some inner conflict that prohibits or limits Helen from holding sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a more unified relationship.

Of further interest is Helen's response to St Theresa's erotic love poetry which perhaps reveals some further reasons as to why she holds sexual and spiritual ecstasy in more dualistic terms:

"When I listen to it more than when I just read it, it's clearly a more sexual experience and my thinking is why? What is the need to dress it up in sort of flowery language in that way? Is there a sense of, 'I do not want to admit that this is the experience I am having so I am going to make it something other'? I use to work in criminology, so my initial thinking when I was listening to it was, 'What are you trying not to say?' No, to me I'm thinking she is having a sexual experience not a spiritual experience. I think she is having a sexual experience ... to make it more acceptable perhaps. I am a cynic as well as Godly. It's clear to me it's sort of a sexual experience but she is not able to say, to put that into words and I think going back to where she is and her situation and context. She has to make it something other to be acceptable, even perhaps to herself."

What comes across here is, either the healthy suspicion of a clearly incisive and questioning participant, who wonders about the historical, religious and contextual constraints that force St. Theresa to express her sexual passion under the guise of religious ecstasy, or someone who, unlike Hannah, posits and configures sexual and spiritual ecstasy as separate, discrete categories of human experience. It would appear that Helen does indeed configure her sexual and spiritual ecstasy as different parallel life forces, and this becomes apparent when she responds to Wilber's claim that sexual bliss can reveal the presence of God:

"I am not sure I agree with that. I am not sure that sex can show you the face of God in any sense of it. Sex is Sex when I was talking about that moment that wasn't about sex that was about connectedness it might have been at the time of sex but I don't feel that sex can show you the face of God. I really don't!"

Similarly, Geoffrey does not personally resonate with the notion that sexual and spiritual ecstasy are in a dialectical relationship and is most explicit on this point when hearing the erotic poetry of St. John:

"I couldn't resonate with that and say, 'Been there! Done that! I know what it feels like!', in that kind of poetic way in which he expresses himself, in the time that he expresses it, and for the kind of people he is expressing it to. Now whether what you are reading is part of the dialogues which he has on St. Teresa of Avila is another matter. It's in a kind of coded language that they both understand but probably would not be able to say to anybody else, because it would be deeply misunderstood and we would see it as something being remarkably sexual."

In place of St. John of the Cross, Geoffrey prefers the writing of John Dunne. He prefers John Dunne because he expounds the *via negativa* as a way of discovering God, and this more readily speaks to him. That sense of:

"Being deeply depressed and deeply troubled by the nature of spiritual experience because he doesn't quite trust it."

The *via negativa* (which is sometimes referred to as apophatic theology), is a philosophical and religious way of talking about God by way of negation rather than by positive affirmation; thereby making God ultimately unknowable, mysterious and other-worldly. Geoffrey qualifies this further:

"I don't think I have ever gone in for ... the language of Saint John of the Cross; it's never been kind of suddenly the angels sing and the lights flash and all that. For me, it's always been much more a sense of connection with the person. It's not that we become a part of each other so it's just the sexual experience. I am much more aware of the person."

Reflecting upon Wilber's quote, particularly the line "sex really can kill you", Geoffrey deducts two meanings from his personal experiences that relate to HIV and AIDS, and the choice to become egoless when in the throes of sexual pleasure with his partner.

"Yes, I think there is a lot there that resonates. As gay men in the last thirty years, sex really can kill you and we know that. I think it is the nature of the danger because of in the middle of sex you do find yourself losing yourself, that you're no longer in control. That I think is for many people and I speak for myself as well. There is that moment where you know it is going to happen, and do you let it happen or not?"

4.1.5 Summary

Most respondents, spanning the heterosexual and LGBT spectrum, had a unifying approach to their sexual and religious impulses, and clearly the erotic poetry from the Christian mystics, the pictorial *coniunctio* and Wilber's quote stimulated some of these responses. While there was a preponderance of participants who held these two aspects of human experience in a dialectical relationship, there were a handful of clergy from the C of E who were aware that to preach on this topic, or read from the Christian mystics, or indeed display a *coniunctio* depicting this distinctive inter-relationship, could prove to be offensive or even controversial. There were also differences of opinion, and therefore experiences, between the male participants about St. Theresa's graphic and energetic account of mystical union with God. Hadley struggled with the inferred intrusion and potential violence of this piece, while Grant wrestled with the numinous quality (Otto, 1958) of pain and pleasure that such an encounter with God might afford. What was also interesting to note was that two of the participants', Hannah and Helen, rekindled their affectionate memories of an intimate contact that they had with their young child who lay across their chest while sleeping; this memory vividly resurfaced upon hearing the love poetry of St. John of the Cross.

While several participants held their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a unified relationship they nevertheless reported at other points in the interview process that for different reasons ecstatic union with God through sexual bliss had not transpired; some clearly hoped that one day this might be realized in their own love-making. This will be addressed in greater detail under the next superordinate theme.

Summing-up this superordinate theme suggests that: the majority of participants', who expressed their predisposing frame of reference regarding their distinctive relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy, were in effect expressing an openness and a receptivity to the possibility of experiencing mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy. The critical point here is whether this proclivity, plainly expressed, has ever been actualized as a direct phenomenological experience of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004); and if so, what was the impact of such a potent experience. We now turn to the next superordinate theme: Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy.

4.2 THEME TWO: Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy and the Aftereffects

4.2.1 Introduction

Here, the key theme that will be addressed is the Presence and Impact of Transcendent Sex. This will be achieved by focusing upon the various descriptors that twelve of the twenty participants used to both describe their direct experience of mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy; and the aftereffects of such events in terms of their personal growth and psychological development. Further noteworthy subthemes will follow, including Experiencing Sexual Ecstasy during a Public Act of

Worship; Barriers to Experiencing *Unio Mystica* through Sexual Ecstasy; and, the Shadow Side of Sex.

4.2.2 The Presence and Impact of Transcendent Sex

For Hadley mystical union with God involves a process of being psychologically exposed, and when this process is heightened it reveals to him his true nature as both sex and spirit. He can experience these aspects of his humanity in separate and in unifying ways. He notes that his sex and spirit are:

“A very similar set of feelings really, very similar.”

His key motivational need that unites his sexual and religious libido is a deep longing for the human other and the Divine other. This desire can be both joyful and painful:

“Human relationships, sexuality and the journey of faith, yearning: it can be painful and that yearning for a unity with God, like in sexual union: you can’t get close enough, you almost want to merge.”

However, despite this intermingling of yearning and pain, Hadley is clear that when his desire for God is consummated through his human desire for his partner, he feels empowered. This yearning and pain are reminiscent of Lancaster’s (2011) understanding of the purpose of transpersonal experience as an essential vehicle through which to reconcile differences. Through encountering God during sexual ecstasy, he is able to find consilience between his passion and pain and discover, in this vulnerability, a transformative sense of empowerment. Consequently, as a result of being stripped bare he feels more in touch with his truer essence:

“Being stripped bare, exposed, stripped bare, vulnerable but empowered. Also, at the same time, secure, comfortable, more me and a connection which goes beyond words or speech.”

There is also an explicit sense in the way that Hadley transcended his cognitive and linguistic capacities as he encountered the ineffability of God’s presence. A key phrase, which was paraphrased from time to time, was that of Hadley being more in touch with his true self as a result of his distinct relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy. In these instances, he is acutely aware of being in the present moment and rooted in his authentic nature. Here are a couple of examples:

“When sex is going well, there’s a sense of deep satisfaction, a synchronisation, almost a choreography; you’re that attuned. It’s like a perfect private team work and I feel at that moment more myself than I think at any other time.”

“The other place I feel very myself, may be not quite as much so, but close is standing behind the altar in that setting.”

At one-point Hadley shared that while he was at theological college training for the priesthood, he had disclosed that the Eucharist made him feel amorous. As he recounts this to me, he seamlessly moves between the altar and bed. This communicates how the energies of Eros (sexual impulse) and the Self (religious impulse) coalesce and reveal themselves as archetypal companions shaping his sex and faith journey.

“So, you’ve got those concrete things in common, beauty, even down to some of the robes and some of the vestments, the linen and the rest of it, and that laying of the altar which is like how you might lay a bed for a particular valentine. Sprinkling of petals in some Christian traditions done certain times of the year. There’s an awful lot in common for me and I don’t think that can be a mistake that we like those things in those contexts at both times.”

The short term and long-term aftereffects of experiencing the Third (Haule, 2010) during his love-making with his wife are further explored and voiced by Hadley. An

immediate impact of both his sexual and spiritual ecstasy is to feel secure and comfortable. Furthermore, his experience reinforces his worldview about the beauty of the parishioners he serves and the one-off meetings with troubled people he may have during his working week; along with his view that as a consequence of having his sexuality and spirituality reconfirmed once more, through moments of *Unio Mystica*, he can use his sexuality in his ministry to connect and bond with his congregation.

"I find people beautiful! I find the human form beautiful, I find human faces beautiful even if they're not pretty, and definitely, sexuality is in my ministry all the time, I'm flirtatious frankly, I'm flirtatious with old ladies and I can be flirtatious with a male server in a very different way but it's all in there!"

Linda also makes a profound link between her sexual and spiritual ecstasy in terms of exposure. How her same-sex relationship has, during sexual ecstasy, exposed her to the presence of God, which is indistinguishable from her experiences, however fleetingly, of the sacred during contemplation and prayer time. She contends that the C of E hierarchy are so fearful of sexual ecstasy as an indispensable counter-part to spiritual ecstasy, because it is such a direct, visceral and real experience of the Divine; and to teach and preach this message would mean a loss of control for the hierarchy.

"The institution is so frightened of it (sexual ecstasy) because it is a very real experience, and there's no hiding. It's a very exposing experience which I think is why a human being can't ever love unconditionally, but it's perhaps the nearest thing that you get to it, because one is exposed. A very intimate experience and one imagines that we are all intimately exposed to God. So, there must be close parallels there."

After further contemplating her direct experiences of mystical union through sexual ecstasy, Linda describes the qualities and impact of these experiences, thus:

"I understand that love, in both its physical and psychological, and spiritual dimensions has a certain exquisiteness. The exquisiteness of it can also have pain within it. So, there's a lot of passion and intensity. When we talk about The Passion of Christ, it can have lots of meanings that word, 'passion' ... there's a kind of pain and passion, interwoven and love. They're all part of the same thing."

For Linda, the impact of *Unio Mystica*, through sexual ecstasy with her partner, help her forget herself with the result that she and her partner become:

"Neither one, nor the other, but both really. A bit indistinguishable. I don't lose my sense of myself but the other is indistinguishable from me. The experience is certainly life-giving, energising and joy-giving."

As she verbalises her experiences about her same-sex relationship, Linda declares:

"There is so much gift and life in these things. We both feel that our love is of God but being mere fallible human beings, sometimes we get a bit wobbly, but it still gives me that sense and I still feel that is what I was meant to experience. Being a Clergy person but not in a Parish. I just live with my own integrity and fortunately that's what I can do."

Ruminating about his experiences relating to his sexual and spiritual ecstasy, Henry, immediately connects with the erotic and spiritual musings of St. John of the Cross to reveal his direct experiences of sex and spirit when in the throes of love-making with his life-long partner:

"That's beautiful and it's all about being transported. All the cares go and the loss, and the total focus on someone who loves you so much, it takes you out of yourself and again that absolute love for someone."

The unifying experience, here, relates to self-transcendence and moving beyond the Cartesian spatial boundaries and language appertaining to space and time; while simultaneously feeling a deep sense of connectedness with his partner.

"There's been no premarital or extramarital sex, so it has been about a relationship with one person, and at times it has been a very strong human bond, and the connectedness of it is very important to me, and in ideal terms that sense of focusing upon somebody else and their experience, and making them happy."

This possibility of a *Unio Mystica* experience occurring in Henry's world has a distinct horizontal vision to it, suggesting a strong relational-participatory (Ferrer, 2011) quality to it. This transpersonal dynamic of transcending his definitive sense of self is reiterated once more:

"That we're not completely inside our skin, it could be sex, it could just be the fact that we fancy an ice cream on a hot day but it's that we're not self-contained, and so creating. In fact, that's how we co-create. Either through the relationships we create or the children we create. It could be sex, it could be music. It could be all kinds of things. They're all very physical as well and that union in sex with other people, that seems one way of connecting, singing in a group, rowing in an 8, whatever, getting outside of our skin, they're all part of that!"

In this well-defined way, Henry does not privilege the *Unio Mystica* through sexual ecstasy alone and he is clearly open and receptive to encountering the Divine presence in a myriad of ways, which can be gentle or ecstatic. This key theme of expanding his sense of self beyond his ego-consciousness which is deeply self-validating and affirming, correlates with a transpersonal encounter with the sacred. Henry restates once more:

"Just to affirm: holding sexuality and spirituality together. It seems to me to be very important ... That quote that said, "Sex can kill you" and then it was, "It can kill the side of you that's all locked in", the false self, you've got to die. That was another word people used to describe for orgasm."

In some qualitative sense he seems to be suggesting that his sex and faith life remind him that his self or ego-consciousness is merely an expression of that deeper reality or dynamic ground (Washburn, 1988) that is expansive, sacred and connecting.

The aftereffects from moments of transcendent sex have also been far reaching for Henry, and have remarkable parallels with Hadley's experiences discussed above. For

both of these participants' experiencing God through sexual ecstasy is channelled into their ministry in a complementary and enhancing way.

"It does affect the way I am with other people because I feel I can be quite affectionate with other people. I may touch people more than some would. I might put my arm around a prisoner, or might have a young woman student I would see because I do feel quite confident that sexuality is part of all my relationships, but the boundaries are very clear with everybody else, and that helps me in my ministry. But I actually feel the one relationship that I have, can spill out into quite close relationships with lots of people."

Like Hadley above, Howard discloses that when he is in the throes of love-making with his partner he goes beyond the veil between heaven and earth, and touches base with his pure essence as sex and spirit, that leads him to a deeper, more authentic connection with himself and with God. These moments allow him to disrobe himself of the numerous façades that can take him away from his true nature.

"It's like I am not Howard the vicar, or Howard the psychotherapist or Howard the... I'm just Howard and somehow there is a pureness, there is an essence, a powerful connection there and with who I really am."

He interestingly attributes this integration of his sex and faith life to both the formative influence and impact of his very grounded and earthy mother and his over-spiritualised father. During the previous superordinate theme, I commented on how Howard shrieked with delight upon hearing the ecstatic moans of St. Theresa of Avila's vision, with the exclamation: "Spiritual organisms, wonderful! I can completely relate to that!" Here, of equal note is Howard's impassioned response to Wilber's quote, which reveals further Howard's experiences of God through the veil of sexual ecstasy.

"That encapsulates really what I was trying to say about to me sex blowing away the adaptations, the compromises, the social niceties, and the entire sort of roles we adopt and actually speaking to the core. I think it is what Wilber is saying here that it can kill your full self-off, if by you it's meant the ordinary you, the everyday skin encapsulated ego. It's not that sex can be mind blowing sex, it can show you

the face of God. I believe that because it reveals at its heart our true self. I understand that what he is saying."

Howard cogently describes the impact of such moments in terms of being touched by grace which relativizes his ego, and fills him with grace as he deals with other people both in his personal and professional roles:

"I think when you have been touched by grace, which I think is another way of experiencing this, is that one becomes more graceful with other people and with one's environment. A less egocentric I think, this is my experience, but I don't feel as if I have to prove anything because there is no need for that really."

Leonard-Barry, thinking about his experiences of God during the throes of sexual love-making, reports that his sex and faith life have always being in reciprocal relationship:

"I've always experienced sexuality as just again a part of my being and perhaps it was quite odd to discover how funny the Church was about it! My guess is, there is a part of me that can be very kind of expert and mischievous and those kinds of things, I suppose I began, one of the ways I coped with my sexuality was to be a holy person but a sexual person."

As a result of his experiences of transcendent sex, he began to realize how attractive human beings were in far more embodied and engaging ways.

"I think I'd always realised it perhaps in an intellectual way and in a more emotional way. I suppose I conceived of myself as being a lover."

These encounters with others have been an inspiration to Leonard-Barry's sex and faith journey, in respect of his psychological growth and spiritual development. He recounts:

"I've been inspired by peoples' love and enjoyed reciprocating that in lots of ways really and again, I don't know how it started but modestly from a very early age but I didn't see any division between sexuality and spirituality."

And when this love was consummated and the sense of God was present, it reminded him of the old marriage service of two people becoming one with a deep sense of embodied closeness and intimacy. In the aftermath of these moments he would feel:

"Losing, uniting, relief, I suppose and again it is a tangible experience of existing, but existing in harmony or existing in expectation. Inspiration, calmness, particularly, yes, where there has been difficulty, problems perhaps, which somehow sex eased that and relieved that."

Clearly, these heightened experiences of the Divine through sexual ecstasy had a profound impact upon his sense of self and his place in the world: he seemingly felt self-validated and separate categories such as cognition, affect, body and spirit were harmonized. Another experience after love-making involves gratitude and that everything was alright, and no longer having to strive somewhat compulsively to be outwardly loving or befriending. He was at peace and in love with them without having to pretend or work at it.

On a mischievous note, Leonard-Barry confessed that during his years at theological college he invariably gravitated towards other fellow ordinands at theological college who integrated their sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and would reciprocate this; and as for those who were dualistic or even pole faced in this regard, he would be playfully challenging.

Just prior to Gareth describing his experiences of transcendent sex, he felt compelled to passionately critique the legacy of St. Augustine of Hippo and

expose the guilt and shame that continues to haunt Christianity about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Judging by the tempo and the vitality of the emotions that he used, I sensed that his own capacity not to be infected by this bad-flesh theology had been borne out of his own courageous struggles to dis-identify from these shame-ridden theologies:

"We've got so much to blame Augustine for - his sort of flesh is bad theology, and that's just infected us and given so much guilt to understanding the body, which is there to be enjoyed but in an appropriate way. It seems as if the missionary position between a man and woman, that is the only sort of approved manner and it's not to be enjoyed. It's just to do the job it needs to do which is produce babies."

He then went on to describe how sexual ecstasy and reciprocal sexual pleasure has taken him beyond, into something unique and strong, which signifies his sense of self expanding without fear and feeling an overwhelming sense of connectedness or oneness.

"When there is that complete empathy and the pleasure is in giving pleasure and that's reciprocated and that is when it is at its most meaningful, and its most building up in terms of the relationship beyond the sexual, into something which is unique."

At one point in the interview, Gareth referred to his partner of many years as his lover and soulmate, and the only person to have ever fully known him. I was taken by the physical, spiritual and emotional undertones of this comment and so, I gently reflected his words back to him. He responded in the following way:

"I mean that element is true to know me as I am fully known. I mean that's not something either of us have a problem with, we are a reasonably prayerful couple playing together and these things. We don't stop in the middle and say, 'Let's shoot up an arrow prayer, shall we? No, let's just get busy with each other, but it is all held together and we try not to separate things.'"

For Gareth, having encounters with the Divine through homoerotic love-making blesses and confirms his sense of wholeness and reminds him about the distinctive nature of his sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

"Wholeness is about being able to be a person who is complete which includes the spiritual as well as the carnal; as well as the practical; as well as the experiential; as well as the visual ... that's the wholeness and if you take anything out you are less than complete."

Finally, Gareth is clear that for him moments of *Unio Mystica* are linked to an earth-shattering orgasm with his partner, and while these moments are rare their gift does not fade: that he is blessed and graced by God and simultaneously, his relationship with his partner is strengthened.

"Those moments of really great and high momentous climax, is something which is, doesn't happen so often as one would like, but you do remember those moments and those moments are very, very, significant in cementing relationships and confirming who you are."

Over the years Gerald has become alienated from the C of E due to the oppression he experienced for being gay; as a result, his allegiance to the C of E and his faith have waned over the years. He hid behind the persona of a parish priest to sublimate his same-sex desire underneath his spirituality. He considered becoming a Franciscan Friar as a further way to sublimate his sexuality, and even though he found a suitable partner (who he is still with today) when he was a young priest the Franciscans' pressurized him to join them. Hence, his dislike, suspicion and vociferous comments about Monks and Nuns. He reports that he has experienced spiritual ecstasy through gay sexual intimacy and has held these two aspects of being in a unified relationship.

Gerald recalls how he tried to deny his homoerotic desires, initially by denying them and directing them into parish life.

"I tried to sublimate, you see, and I didn't succeed. Of course, I didn't. Well I did to begin with, at school, in the army and then at the theological college. It was all sublimated. I got my knickers in a terrible twist really, because I fell in love with unsuitable people. Either they were not gay - they didn't know I was in love with them, but I mean they must have wondered why I was mooning around them, you know - or they were gay and they were equally frightened."

Earlier on in the interview, Gerald became agitated and annoyed at those men and women who take up a life of celibacy as a monk or a nun. He bellowed:

"I've always been rather suspicious of Monks and Nuns because I think they try to bury all their sexual feelings in chastity or celibacy, and I don't know how they do it, and I can't really think how I would do it, but they do it. I used to know so many Franciscans brothers for instance who were all terribly randy and yet on the surface would have this sort of language that St Theresa uses: the fact that they were married to God or he was their lover or Jesus was their lover, and I used to think: 'What twaddle!'"

This compunction to sublimate his same-sex desires, because they were considered ungodly, were further exacerbated when the Franciscan order of brothers (monks) confronted him when he eventually found a reciprocal loving relationship:

"I did wonder about being a Religious when I was twenty or twenty-one, and they did encourage me to become a Friar, but as soon as I met my partner that was over, but they still continued and that annoyed me. They said: 'It won't last!' One Friar was on at me saying: 'These relationships don't last'. He said: 'It would be much better if you came and joined us with the Friar', and that was twaddle too! I knew it was twaddle!"

This helped me make sense of his hurt and anger, and the outspoken way in which he communicated his mistrust of religious monks and nuns sublimating their sexuality, because for many years this had been the plight of Gerald; not out of choice but due to the anti-sexual messages he received familial, societally and from the C of E. This also helped me to reframe and interpret his comments that he envied young gay

Christian men today, because they were surrounded by more affirmative voices both within the margins of the C of E and in the public context of wider society. However, he was far from naïve or idealistic on this point:

"I'm envious of the young gay person now who can relax, particularly if he's a Christian, he'll still get nutters telling him he's sinful but if he's strong enough he'll just get on with life, make his relationships some of which will fail in the same way as a heterosexual does."

In many ways Gerald missed out on an affirming family, society and Church to help him integrate his sexual and spiritual ecstasy to undergird his psychological growth and spiritual development. He was able to share that in the end, it did indeed work out for him. Looking back over the years he recounted his powerful experiences of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004), thus:

"I think you go onto another plane because you're so happy together and it isn't just the sex, it's the fact that you are with the other person, and that they love you and you love them. I think it can lift you to another plane as my music or walking does. Sex can lift you to another plane especially at the orgasm and then after the orgasm lying with your friend and just being together. Whole afternoons can go by where you have sex several times and that to me is wonderful."

Like Gareth, Gerald links that point of crossing the boundary between sexual and spiritual ecstasy to the intensity of the orgasm and what follows in terms of lying there with his male partner, which from our current vantage point we could project onto the image of St. John of the Cross, with the Christian soul laying across the chest of God or Christ, in a post-coital embrace. Shouldered out of Gerald's experience he implores me to communicate to others:

You can't really put sex in one box and spirituality in another box because they actually belong together. Please, just try and consider how you might merge the two so that you are a whole person.

At this point Gerald boldly asserts that there is Godliness in so-called promiscuous gay sex, but that discernment and respect is needed as to how this should be negotiated:

“Even promiscuous sex, if it’s consensual you are together, you are enjoying it and when it’s consensual, then I think you do feel happy together and there is something of the Divine in your kissing and cuddling, never mind about actually having physical anal intercourse or whatever.”

Unlike Gerald, Glen is able to accept that some people can only eroticize their spiritual experience because this is their only means to express their sexuality, and while this can be powerful, this does not work for this participant. This is elicited upon hearing the love poetry of St. John of the Cross. Reflecting upon his distinctive relationship between his sexuality and spirituality, Glen ponders upon his experiences of sexual intercourse with other men and consequently underlines these two basic parts of our humanity as primary:

“I think it’s a deeply spiritual moment because it is the sense of the basest part of our humanity, and I don’t mean that in a negative way, but I think it’s without all the crap of our psychology to a certain extent.”

He goes on to describe the feelings associated with transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) and the nature in which God is revealed through heightened sexual ecstasy with another man; and how in the aftermath of this encounter his faith is more aligned in terms of embracing and embodying an incarnational sex and faith stance:

“It’s very sort of raw, simple, primal, encounter, and since we hold very strongly that we’re created in God’s image and function as we do with God as the Creator of all that we are, then there is a sense in which that moment aligns us in some way with the faith that we hold.”

This leads him to theologize about his encounter with God through sexual ecstasy and what immediately comes to his mind is the image of the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit).

"I have always been quite deeply influenced by the idea of The Trinity being about the embrace of the other and that the whole surrender to the other. To a certain extent, depending on the specific logistics of any kind of sexual encounter that can be felt and experienced for human beings, both ways. So, I always found, without it being a threesome or whatever, there is something quite Trinitarian about it, a deep, sort of intimate union."

My interpretation of this is that the Third (Haule, 2010) touches the space between him and his male lover creating a Trinitarian dynamic between himself, his lover and God, which is in no way meant to imply a ménage à trois. I'm also reminded here of Coakley's (2013) re-reading of the Holy Trinity that she presents as a Christian pattern of respect, reciprocity and mutually. She offers this as a way of going beyond patriarchy and patriarchal power imbalances that have invariably existed between men and women.

Returning to the transpersonal notion of bringing reconciliation (Lancaster, 2011) between opposing experiences, Glen reports that for him encountering God through sexual ecstasy helps him to find the middle ground between his human vulnerability and his human potency:

"It taps deeply into two things: a deep vulnerability and a deep powerfulness, to a greater or lesser extent. I mean that's the essence of the human condition, to be vulnerable and to be powerful. There is an ecstasy in this and when it's very affirming, if it's a good experience, it can be very affirming."

This leads Glen to share that for him going in pursuit of a casual male lover has striking parallels with his search for God. He elaborates further:

"I think there is an enormous difference between sex as result of a sort of, a sort of hunt and sex as a part of a monogamous, long term relationship. I think they are about different things. I think desire plays a role differently in both cases, in that desire in a hunt can be quite akin to the search for God."

I enquired about the impact this had upon Glen, when his desire to track another man for sexual ecstasy went well and was fully consummated.

"That absolute yearning for someone, tends to fall upon you when you're in those dark moments, when you think your faith is a load of old bullshit, but you're desperate for a sign of some affirmation. I can't think of anything else in all our interactions that would arouse the intensity of feelings as that experience."

I was very touched by Glen's honesty and sheer eloquence as he reflected upon his primary instincts of Eros (sexual impulse) and the Self (religious impulse). He clearly explicates these mystical states from a deep place within his own embodied experiences, and articulates this through his own theological sensibility. What these particular experiences seem to suggest is that Glen encounters an intense emotional state of pleasure and pain in his longing, and through the chance encounter with another man, when this goes well, there is a sense of surrender and subsequent peace that leads to self-transformation. His incarnational faith is sexually and spiritually recalibrated, as he finds his sense of homeostasis once again. Glen contrasts his trust in this process with what he perceives, along with many of his priestly colleagues who also identify as gay, as a Christian sexual ethic espoused by the C of E that leads to repression.

At one-point Glen declares that his faith is highly intellectualized, which puzzled me. On the one hand, he was speaking of his distinctive relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy with greater passion and vitality as the interview unfolded, and

on the other hand, I noted in the moment, he often prefixed his expressions with “I think”. So, I noticed this and wondered aloud, whether his sexual and physical longings was his way of finding a balance between his intellectual faith and his embodied need for the other. that as the interview had unfolded he had become more engaged and passionate. He emphatically agreed that going on the hunt for sex with another man might be his way of having an embodied experience of God, to complement his intellectualized faith.

Upon listening to the ecstatic and painful excitations of St. Theresa experiencing God in her mystical vision, Glen makes a formidable connection with the raptures of male anal intercourse:

“I would imagine, frankly, a bottom (anus) would say that is what the sexual act is like for them; and Theresa seems to be saying that’s the sort of sweetness and pain that God evokes in her. When God enters St. Theresa in some way, the pain of that which we don’t really get to the bottom of, but presumably it is God and she is aware that nothing can be sweeter than the One that she seeks, in spite of the pain. I’ve never ever thought about it in that way, before.”

In this way Glen, unmistakably communicates the sacred interface that sexual ecstasy with another man has provided him during his sex and faith journey, to date. Finally, Glen comments that in his direct experience the ‘simple’ act of sex has been such a powerful inroad to God, and how regrettably to speak or preach of this within the Church would not be permissible:

“So, a very simple act (sex) is just imbued with so much meaning and if we believe that God is the Creator then those things that link is to our Creator can lead us to the Face of God; and I’d like to say, more than I feel able to in the Church at the moment.”

As a gay man, Grant makes sacrifices about his sexual identity so as not to be a stumbling block to others who are searching for Christ in their lives through the Christian faith.

“As a gay priest I’ve deliberately chosen to compromise, to a certain extent, how I present myself to the general public, because of the need to maintain a sense of mutual respect for the office of a priest. That also has led me to present in a way that people don’t automatically assume that I’m gay and then of course they make assumptions that you’re not.”

He has had his nipples pierced to hold onto something of his true self and identity, behind the clerical attire that he adorns to display his public office as a C of E parish priest.

“I have my nipples pierced and I think that’s partly because that is maintained as a private thing, that’s partly about keeping a sense of myself being not quite the person who is presented to the world.”

Interestingly, on his form he inadvertently ticked the boxes to indicate that he was heterosexual, while clearly from his interview this was not the case. He has encountered spiritual ecstasy through same-sex sexual ecstasy, and felt the closeness of God through this process which has informed his daily living and his spiritual growth and development. Reflecting upon his spiritual experiences within Church or in the wider world, Grant then contrasts these states with his same-sex relationships:

“I would also want to say that there are times within sexual intimacy that there is that same sense of being taken out of myself and connecting to a Larger Reality, and occasionally they can be extremely intense moments of an almost overwhelming feeling of love for life.”

As a result, he has an enhanced experience of himself and an expanded connection with all things, including:

“God, my partner, life, the Universe and everything!”

These intense experiences of *Unio Mystica* through the pleasures and joys of sexual ecstasy with another man:

"Enable me to bring that trust in God's goodness and God's power of redemption, and God's transforming work to the people I administer to."

Like Glen, Grant is taken by the comingling of pain and pleasure that St. Theresa recounts from her Divine illumination of God.

"I suppose there's a certain frisson because there's a fear of pain and so a sense of dread and longing that go together, because one would be fearful of the pain as it's described, spiritual, physical, but also I would want to have the intensity of love for the Divine that is described, there. So, a feeling of awe, mixed with fear and longing, as well."

And like Glen, Grant also links the religious descriptive terms of St. Theresa's vision to his experience of homoerotic ecstasy through anal penetration:

"I mean clearly the imagery is of being penetrated in a way that is both painful and pleasurable and that has very strong links to erotic experience doesn't it, and fantasy, erotic fantasy."

He has had to overcome a deep sense of shame to find a rightness within himself and a same-sex partner that brings love and joy into his life. There is a quiet but emotional undercurrent as Grant declares:

"I mean it's also been, people I've been with, so ... it's been quite a journey to find someone to connect to which is such, a blessing."

However, he did wonder whether the C of E's oppressive stance towards LGBT Christians makes this group over-calibrate this aspect of their identity, along with sexual satisfaction, as a way of holding onto their identity as God-given.

"One of the things that strikes me about the experiences of Lesbian and Gay Christians is that our sense of identity is very closely bound up with our sense of ourselves as sexual beings, and that's forced upon us, because we tend to be

treated as though the only important thing about us, is the way in which we have sexual relationships; and therefore, it becomes important to us to affirm that as a positive thing, when we're told that it defines us in a negative way. So, it becomes more important for us to define ourselves positively that way."

There is perhaps a parallel here as he pierces his nipples to hold onto his gay identity in response to a Church that wishes to discount this aspect of his life. On this front there also appears to be some dissonance between who he is and how he feels loved by God as a gay man, and how the institution treats him as a gay priest; which may account as a further reason for Grant to hide who he is publicly and complete his demographic questionnaire, possibly out of awareness, as a 'straight man'.

"So there's a bit of a disjunction there which I feel I have to maintain in order to be able to fulfil both those senses, that I have of myself which is one, that God created me and affirms me as a gay man, and two, that God also calls me to be a priest in a Church which doesn't allow a gay man to have the full affirmation of the institution."

When listening to the erotic, mystical poetry of St. John of the Cross, Greg initially falls into silence. After a minute or so, he quietly asks if I could please read it to him once again. Here is his reaction:

"I find it very moving. It's very intimate and incredibly sensual ... and within that intimacy there's a release isn't there, the cares or whatever floating away and being left in the moment. That idea I was talking about earlier of just being present to the moment; it's a beautiful place. I have deep longing to be in that place and it's so rarely experienced for me and I suspect quite a lot of what I'm driven to do at times is about trying to find the place like that. No, that's gorgeous."

Visibly, St. John's image captivated Greg and re-cathected him with moments in his own sex and faith journey when he viscerally felt that sensuality and spirituality in his own love-making. It also connected him with those times, however rare, when his sexual and religious impulses brought him to that place of transcending space and time, being fully present in the moment and aware of himself and the other, alongside

the presence of God. This strongly suggests that for Greg his sexual and spiritual ecstasy are in psychological harmony, and in turn this informs his own unique journey towards individuation. This is verified further when he reacts to Ken Wilber's quote:

"It chimes with me and what it makes me think about is a big part of our journey of faith is to be able to remove ourselves from our own self-interest. So, for me the notion of sin is one of self-obsession, and so the quest that we are on, in a sense, is how the self is set aside and instead of me being at the centre of my existence, then it is God that's at the centre of my existence; and I'm able to push myself to the margins a little bit. The quote made me think of that because in sex there's something of that going on that whilst there's a mutuality in the pleasure of sex that the key to it is about the enjoyment of giving pleasure to the other and from that act of giving pleasure is returned."

In addition to communicating how his sexual libido and religious libido interact and commune, Greg is also able to articulate how these two primary instincts can differentiate and how they can diverge.

"They're rooted in the same place but then they end up being divergent, they become directed in a different way. So, I think for me it's become an understanding that in that moment when you might see someone and think "Oh, wow!" and just feel that urge to hold them or embrace them, that is somehow a slightly a distorted redirection of that urge to be in communion with God. I think for me that has been a significant point of growth and learning over the years. Particularly around the gay community where there's a very relaxed and free attitude to relationships and to make sense of that and not to judge that for the sake of judging it, but to understand what's there and what my experience has been in the past that actually hunger is about a hunger for God and that's been a helpful point of understanding."

Greg's self-awareness about his previous lopsided or distorted relationship between his archetypal energies of Eros and the Self (TePaske, 2008) has evidently been a source of growth and probably, painful learning. As I reflected on Greg's ruminations on this point I was reminded of Jung's adage, that a person will psychologically thrive in their development when their sexual and spiritual ecstasy are in right accord; and "[i]f one or the other aspect is lacking to him, the result is injury or at least lopsidedness that may easily veer towards the pathological. Too much of the animal distorts civilized

man, too much civilization makes sick animals” (1917/1926/1943, para. 32). On this note, Greg clearly had endured and worked through those painful times when his sexual and spiritual impulses were out of balance.

“There are a lot of people who are spending a lot of time and energy seeking that (sexual gratification) and haven’t yet come to that point of understanding. I am very aware of several great centres of sexual exploits for gay men in particular, not far from me in this City. I really don’t sit in judgement of that but I think I understand what’s going on there in spiritual terms a bit more and I feel sad about it and that partly comes from my own felt experience of that. That’s the other reason I don’t judge them is, I was a young man too once, but I think now I’m able to look back and say ‘I know what was going on there’.”

Greg returns to how moments of *Unio Mystica* or glimpsing God, no matter how transiently through sexual ecstasy, shape and inform him on his unique journey towards individuation. Here, he holds his sexual and spiritual impulses in a unitary way when reflecting upon their combined impact during mystical union through sexual intercourse with his male partner.

“They’re both things that happen in the moment and give you a sense of being present to the now rather than anxieties about the future or regrets about the past, or whatever. They both lift me out of anxiety and doubt or stress or whatever onto a slightly different plane.”

As Greg transcends onto a higher plane of consciousness he reports that:

“My sense of self becomes slightly suspended. So, there is in that moment a carefreeness which is rather beautiful.”

He further divulges that simultaneously he feels a deep sense of connection with his partner and with God, at that moment when:

“Something clicks and ... I’m sure that’s a glimpse of the Divine ... there’s a real suspension of time and place and becomes just about that moment and relishing it and relishing pleasure for pleasure’s sake.”

As a result of this encounter with the sacred through sexual union with his partner he feels:

“A bit calmer, I would say, and again and a greater sense of completion and a sense of union that has a wholeness of it that I carry that with me into the days ahead.”

For Greg, glimpsing God through sexual ecstasy is not about orgasm necessarily, but about mutual pleasure for this gay priest; about being in the moment and not caught up with where this is going and what should happen next. He is very passionate in his responses which signals that he is speaking from deep within inside his experience of wisely knowing, having wrestled with these issues for many years. To give justice to his phenomenological experiences of his relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy, Greg brings a final level of texture and nuance to describe his experiences of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004), which is worthy of our attention.

“It’s something that takes you close. I think that notion of thin places is quite a helpful one in that respect. These are experiences where it just seems like Heaven and Earth are just almost there. But it’s that feeling that we glimpse in a spiritual moment or a sexual moment or another of those little moments of perfection in the now.”

Gregory sees himself as part of the Eternal Spirit which sparked into life with The Big Bang that started the universe. From this perspective, having discovered the writings of Wayne Dyer, he has re-envisioned his understanding of his sexual and spiritual impulses in terms of being a spiritual being having human experiences – this idea, originally propagated by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, has gripped him. He describes his experience of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) in the following way:

“I’m deeply, deeply connected with the explosive, creative essence and energy of God that has been. So, a gift that has been entrusted to me to draw out, not only for myself but my partner.”

Once again, we glimpse a sense of the *Unio Mystica* along with a distinct felt sense for this participant of the Third (Haule, 2010) or the sacred entering the human space between two lovers enjoying their loving, sexual interaction between them. For Gregory, this revelation of God through sexual ecstasy is linked, but not exclusively, to the ecstatic potentialities linked to orgasm.

In more recent years Gregory has embraced panentheism (as opposed to pantheism). In *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, the following definition is presented: “[I]t holds that God’s inclusion of the world does not exhaust the reality of God. Panentheism understands itself as a form of theism, but it criticizes traditional theism for depicting the world as external to God” (1983, p.423). This definition helps to make sense of Gregory’s reflections about the human and sacred essence of sexual orgasm as he experiences it during his homoerotic love-making with his partner; it also helps to understand how these non-ordinary states of higher consciousness expose him to the heartbeat of God in his very core.

“It connects with this creative, orgasmic, explosive ... I think in human experience orgasm is one of the most, deepest, broadest, intense experiences imaginable. I am God having an orgasm in every breath and there have been sexual orgasmic moments when I have felt I have looked deep into the heart of God.”

In the aftermath of these experiences what is reinforced for Gregory is:

“This idea, this notion that I am God having a Gregory experience. It reinforces, for me, my Divinity.”

While these phenomenological experiences may sound outrageous or even blasphemous to some, these heightened levels of ecstasy have been well documented in Christianity. For example, the theologian, philosopher and mystic, Meister Eckhart

when passing beyond the union between his soul and God, to a pre-existing state of Godhead, declared: “I find in this breakthrough God and I are one and the same” (cited in, Wilber, 2000, p.310).

Considering the ramifications of these experiences and how they influence and enlighten his daily life, Gregory narrates that:

“I have this sense of co-creating. God calls us to co-create, to own creativity, and I think sexual experience and insight is having a moment. I mean, I don’t believe in the literal Genesis story but in that moment of what human beings described as the process of creation, I’m feeling that exact same energy within every fibre of my being which I then have to feel, I have to embody. I have to be connected with and have to hold because it’s with this explosion.”

Consequently, he feels compelled to embrace this orgasmic explosion that has existed from the beginning of time with the Big Bang:

“I must own that and bring it to every conversation, every relationship, everything I do, bring that potential creativity to bear, to flourish.”

This orgasmic, explosive force is not, for Gregory, exclusively tied to sex and sexual orgasm. Rather, its God-given energetic impulse can be met in multiple ways:

“I think it is most uniquely experienced when we have these astonishing insights in the throes of love making or in a bottle of wine, but it’s got to be the best bottle of wine that illuminates all our senses, all our passions. But, it’s not confined to that orgasmic moment or the sip or the inhalation of the aroma of the bottle of wine. That impulse, that creative impulse, must be delivered to everything. If there was a Big Bang then everything that has been created, was created out of that orgasmic pleasure; and to live, to be living into our Godliness is to be bringing that same orgasmic pleasure to everything that we do.”

Tamara, resonates with the sacred and erotic imagery of St. John of the Cross because this relates to her own theological and spiritual approach, and her personal

experiences of love-making; the key point in the poem that instantly appeals is the sensation of losing oneself in the moment:

“Well that this the sort of spirituality I can relate to very much; so, losing yourself in the moment.”

She elaborates further on what losing herself means for her when encountering the sacred in her sexual love-making.

“If it’s me focussing on my partner or if it’s me receiving, it’s like being lost in the moment. I can’t focus on anything else and my experience is to be with a woman, and so often when the sexual process is surreal rather than parallel.”

My sense here is that for Tamara it is the act of giving or receiving sexual pleasure that can be dreamlike or otherworldly, exposing her to the spiritual realm. Upon enquiring how such moments impact her world in the days that followed, she replied:

“It does not affect the world and people around me, the only important factor is the relationship ... I want that to be there. It’s part of showing your affection for each other. So, counting on the intimacy.”

In this subsection we have analysed and presented the descriptive categories that best capture the 12 participants’ experiences of *Unio Mystica* through sexual ecstasy. In addition, we have also presented our findings as to how these heightened moments impact these participants’ in terms of aftereffects, such as their relationships and their ministry; and more widely, their unique journey of psychological and spiritual individuation. We now address the subtheme to analyse those participants’ who have experienced sexual ecstasy during a public act of sacred worship.

4.2.3 Experiencing the Sexual Ecstasy during a Public Act of Worship

Three participants reported that when administering the bread and wine during the Eucharist they had experienced moments of erotic arousal within this sacred setting

and transaction. Hadley, Leonard-Barry and Howard reflect on these experiences candidly and thoughtfully. Hadley reports that in the giving of the sacraments of bread and wine he occasionally can feel discomforted by the evocation of his erotic ecstasy during a sacred act. He describes how:

"[T]he actual physical positioning, in our church it's kneeling at the altar. When the priest comes around, and I'm very aware sometimes that half of my congregation are widows and very often you find the vicar becomes almost everybody's husband, it's not sexual, well maybe it is, but there's a certain flirtation and then you're serving them at this height. It is erotic! And then I'm aware of some people, some adults who I can't persuade into being confirmed because they love being blessed and having a hand placed upon their head."

Similarly, Leonard-Barry re-counts that at some basic level, when placing the consecrated bread into a parishioner's hands or onto a parishioner's tongue, as they kneel before him at the altar rail, his sexual ecstasy will be aroused.

"I can't get away from the feelings that communion is like oral sex and the more beautiful the person kneeling before me, the more desirable that feels."

He denied his erotic feelings when officiating at a Eucharist but as a MH chaplain he was much more at ease with this when a non-Christian colleague asked him this very question. In the same vein, Howard confesses that this erotic surge has also happened to him when administering the sacrament of Holy Communion:

"[E]specially in giving of communion to people, I find. It's almost that you are giving something to somebody there is a sort of quasi, especially if you put the wafer on someone's tongue. Yes, there is an eroticism there and sometimes that can happen and I note it and I don't fight it, or beat myself up about it, it's just there."

Thinking further on this, Howard links this to the sacramental nature of administering Holy Communion, and how human beings and human connections are sacramental in nature and vehicles for transcendence.

"Yes, it's about a connection between people. I mean the sacraments are very earthy vehicles of transcendence so when you are putting something in someone's mouth or giving someone a drink or giving them a blessing, you are touching them. There is a physical connection very often."

4.2.4 Barriers to Experiencing *Unio Mystica* through Sexual Ecstasy

In the previous superordinate theme, it was noted that the following 8 participants did indeed configure their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a dialectical relationship, but as we shall see this predisposition did not in itself automatically lead to moments of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004). For example, when reflecting upon St. Theresa's poetry, which she knew very well, Hannah expressed her concern that the sexual does not obscure the spiritual:

"It's certainly sounds orgasmic and sexual but I think reducing it simply to that is probably missing the spiritual experience as well."

Clearly for Hannah, she is keen to hold sexuality and spirituality in a distinctive and balanced relationship. This is reminiscent of Henry's plea of not placing sexuality and spirituality into a diametrically opposed relationship of 'either/or', discussed earlier under theme one. Somewhat playfully Hannah wistfully noted that:

"I don't think I have had that sort of depth in experience. Oh God, I'm feeling quite let down now!"

While this generated shared laughter between us, Hannah was quick to reiterate the beauty and potency of St. John's poetry uniting sexual and spiritual elation. Like Hadley previously, she was also acutely aware that for some Christians' this would be deemed as unacceptable and disagreeable. She goes on:

"For so many people the body and the soul have to be separate, and the body is a source of evil and disobedience, all those things that are bad and tied-up in their

minds and in order to be good you have to disassociate yourself from all that, which is a shame."

At the same time that Hannah appreciated the relational interface between sexual and spiritual bliss, she also held that for some people in her congregation they would consider this heterosexual *coniunctio* to be:

"Indecent, of being pagan ... that sense of celebrating sex and sexuality has been something that's been very closely linked with pagan traditions, pre-Christian traditions, with Satanist rituals, all those sorts of things. So, there are a lot of people who would find it very difficult to find that holy, and yet it is very clearly meant to be Holy: you've got the halo, you've got the dove, your sense of peace mooted around it, the sky and the flowers."

And as for those parishioners who would be receptive to viewing this picture of a dialectical conjunction of opposites (sex and spirit), she was convinced, after several seconds of silence, that they would:

"Start wondering about God's presence in bodily relationships, and that blessing of two people being joined together."

Earlier in her interview, Hannah, was contemplating her direct experiences of God, and in particular what happened to her phenomenologically when she was touched by the sacred. She was considering this in terms of her own prayer life and with regard to corporate acts of worship. This is what she recounted:

"So, sometimes it could be a taking out of yourself and a sense of being part of a much greater whole. Now whether that is part of the community around you or whether that's God, again depends. Or it can be a sense of actually being taken into yourself and becoming aware of, I suppose, Divinity within yourself and that hugeness and wonder within yourself."

Sometime afterwards, Hannah went on to recount her experiences of God through nature, and her deep connection with the sacred through the beauty and intention of Creation.

“A sense of God’s presence in the world, a sense of beauty and intention in the world. Its panentheism rather than pantheism. It’s that awareness of God that’s the source of being of joy, beauty and love. I think it’s that giving-out and coming-in again in that some of your senses may be heightened.”

Shortly after this point I enquired if Hannah could share, without digressing any detail, what happened to her sense of self when in the throes of sexual love-making with her partner. She replied:

“Very interesting. Sometimes a focus on you, makes you more aware of yourself. Sometimes your focus is more on them, so you are more on them. Sometimes it’s sort of creating something more of the coming together of two people. I keep going back to the same sort of thing, don’t I?”

Judging by her last sentence, Hannah, shrewdly noticed a perennial theme emerging in her discourse: the movement outwards (“a taking out of yourself”, “that giving-out” and “so you are more on them”) and inwards (“actually being taken into yourself”, “coming-in again” and “makes you more aware of yourself”) to describe her spiritual experiences in worship, her felt sense of God in nature and now her sexual love-making with her husband. At this point I gently enquired whether she had ever been aware of the presence of God during the throes of sexual love-making with her partner. She gave a generous and humourous rejoinder that seemed to me to have a tinge of sadness to it, as she divulged:

“There is an element of that Protestant guilt trip that says God is watching!”

Hannah went on to explain her struggle on this front. Here, she contextualises the antecedents that prevent her from contemplating or experiencing the possibility of

encountering God in the bedroom more fully; and how sometimes she has to wrestle with the shadows of the past and hold fast to a more positive reading about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

"I think God designed human beings to share knowledge of each other and share pleasure of each other and become more to each other and to themselves, because of that and that is a good thing. When I'm not regressing to that - I wasn't brought up in a convent school, I had a 'healthy' blast of fairly old fashion Methodism as it were, so that occasionally rears its head - when I am being more logical about this, God came into the world in person but Christ, took on the form of humanity to understand better what it is like to be human. I don't want to start getting involved in speculations about whether Jesus had a sex life or not."

I could not but help notice that this apparent tension (or possible inner conflict) between her Protestant guilt and her positive view about the God-given nature of sex was emblematically conveyed earlier in the interview between those parishioners' who, on the one hand, would deem the heterosexual *coniunctio* as indecent and pagan, and on the other hand, those parishioners who would consider it as a blessing.

When contemplating the mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy, Tess movingly shared her sex and faith journey spanning several years. Previously as a gay man, Tess enjoyed a long-term relationship with her male partner, and following her gender confirmation surgery later in life, she now continues in that relationship as a heterosexual married woman. Looking back prior to her transitioning she notes that her sexual union was always:

"Intimate, connection. It's respectful. It's about communication. It's one aspect of communication, about loving and expressing that love."

Tess, perhaps understandably given her incredible journey towards individuation, links these respectful, loving and intimate connections to her gender:

"I might link this to my gendered-self, if you like, because for me it always felt about being female, which is what it has always been about. Whereas my daily life, for a considerable part of my life I was presenting as male, but that intimate connection with my partner I felt female. That was really important to me"

When invited further to consider whether she had indeed sensed the presence of God as The Third (Haule, 2010) during sexual love-making with her long-term partner, pre-operatively or post-operatively, she replied:

"Well, I said it was about love and I've always felt loved in that sexual connection. Very loved and treated in tender, respectful ways. And this helped me to feel very confirmed in my gender. In terms of God he is in the love."

It would appear that for Tess, her sexual and spiritual ecstasy has been about the confirmation of her gender as a woman, both pre-operatively and post-operatively. This helps to make sense of her response to St. John of the Cross' poetry, revealing the 'upward-ladder' (Wilber, 2000) or transcendent pathway to religious experience:

"Ecstasy, the ecstatic part of it is enjoyable and obviously the ecstatic can be part of our connection with God. But the connection with God is often expected in those terms, in terms of the senses, but that's what's good about St. John. He reminds us that actually the deeper connection may not be the ecstatic bit, the orgasmic bit, the oceanic bit, because that's quite orgasmic too, but more mundane too!"

This perspective echoes with Gabriel's position that was addressed in the previous superordinate theme. What we encountered there was Gabriel's unflinching theological commitment to discerning God in the ordinariness of everyday life along with his suspicion that encounters with the sacred through sexual ecstasy were necessarily universal. However, upon further investigation, Tess reveals that personally she has encountered God during the gentler aspects of love-making. Namely, through loving tenderness and respect. At the end of which, like Hannah, she reveals a possible barrier to allowing herself the possibility of receiving a momentary, gracious gift, of *Unio Mystica* through sexual ecstasy:

"I've learnt from other people that sex is far broader than sexual union. Well, yes of course why would the mystics take that image if it wasn't? The deeper union is beyond the senses as exciting as they are. I experienced God more in the loving tenderness, and respect. I'm so puritanical to think that God is hovering outside of the bedroom."

Gabriel had never heard the erotic love poetry of St. John prior to the research interview and upon hearing it read out aloud, he exclaimed:

"It's very, very beautiful and I love it and I'm glad it's by St John of the Cross, so obviously it's touching me in terms of same-sex relationship as well and the imagery and all that is so, just take out the capital H's and then it's a straightforward love poem in every sense, which is wonderful! And I wish Christianity were a little more comfortable with that sort of language."

He flawlessly moved between the erotic and the sacred with ease by indicating that if the capital H (to signify God or Christ) were changed to a lower-case h (to signify another man), then this would seem to suggest that for Gabriel the human realm of sexual delight and the Divine realm of spiritual bliss are inextricably intertwined. On this point he was most insistent:

"I have a very deep instinct that the erotic, which is plainly a powerful and important part of human life, should not be nudged out of religion or spirituality and it's a healthier thing to see it all as part and parcel. In so far as that affirms that belief, I like it even more."

However, while Gabriel was most definite on this last point, he himself has never experienced the sacred during sex with a male partner. When I enquired about this further, he replied:

"Probably not so much associated with the sexual, purely physical, but that may be more the before and after in a way, the reflection might take you somewhere else. I mean, even not in an overtly or potentially sexual situation just that great sense of unity and togetherness puts you somewhere else."

While Gabriel clearly wants to hold sex and spirit in some kind of theological relationship, which is clear from some of his earlier statements, his own sexual

encounters have been psychologically marked by a heightened awareness of self and other, the mutuality of a shared experience, and at other times simply enjoyed as recreational activity. He did not report that he had encountered God through the veil of sexual ecstasy. Furthermore, when hearing the erotic overtones of St. Theresa's spiritual bliss, he associated this with the sexual impulse being channelled into the religious impulse for a higher purpose.

"The glory of Theresa is that she will be frank about it, and presumably as a celibate, these things have to be expressed somehow and it's marvellous that they are! And, my guess is that if we had somebody committed to the celibate life with us now, he or she would say: 'Well, yes, that's it you see, these energies are released in a different direction'. I'm familiar with from a previous generation of clergy who may have indeed been celibate and directed all those energies into astonishing work and ministry."

After further data analysis of Gabriel's transcript what did transpire was his unflinching theological commitment to discerning God in the ordinariness of everyday life and his suspicion that encounters with the sacred had to be exclusively non-ordinary. This certainly is resonant with Tess' experiences cited above. This became apparent when Gabriel responded to Wilber's quotation.

"So, I recognise what he (Wilber) is saying but not necessarily as describing a universal experience or sensation, so maybe it's back to the ordinary again. So, which remember for me does not discount or devalue anything. And the fact, quite frequently one doesn't necessarily see God in sex isn't really remarkable either, but there's no reason why you should not! I think that's it."

Upon hearing St. Theresa of Avila's vision, Graham, was blown away by the powerful integration of sex and spirit that stirred him up with excitement, hope and resolve.

"It comes across as somebody who describes what the Church has fought all of its life, to split, yeah, and to control, and to make taboo, and to judge, and to make people feel guilty about which is this deep erotic integration of the spiritual and sexual, and emotional experiences as flowing through the whole body, and so my reaction is indeed, I kind of crave that as a sexual experience, as a sex act experience."

He reflects further on the various levels of meaning that St. John's poetry imparts to him:

"I'm being taken into somebody lying on the breast of God or of their lover and it not mattering which it is, and of that profound connectedness and intimacy; and the flow of connected beauty and life, and infusion of the two becoming one: the two indeed discovering Oneness."

He wholeheartedly responded from a place of deeply knowing the sexual and spiritual undercurrents that are intertwined in this Christian mystic's poetry, both from a heartfelt and genuine place. Here, the 'inner' and 'outer' realms of knowing reverberated that resulted in Graham identifying with St. John's writing along with his heartfelt response. Suddenly, a sadness prevailed as he shared some sensitive childhood experiences that continued to impact him, limiting his capacity to experience God through sexual ecstasy. When he was 16 the newly licensed Curate who was engaged to be married infiltrated the participant's family home – his mother was depressed at the time – and the Curate seduced him. His mother idealized the young Curate. He feared that if he disclosed this he would feel irreparably ashamed and the young Curate would be sent to prison. He feels he did not have the courage to stop it and physically and sexually it was non-adventurous, non-penetrative sex. The way he coped with these encounters was to dissociate. Movingly, he comments:

"To survive, I wasn't there and so I have always found it difficult to re-integrate, to be present physically with somebody and let myself to go into the experience ... and a moment arrives when suddenly I get into my head and ... I lose my core."

He explicitly discloses his deep longing that perhaps one day this might be different, and he might be able to receive God's gracious gift of passing through the veil of

sexual ecstasy to encounter the sacred in his gay love-making. Here he laments that as yet, this has not been his experience.

"We're re-integrating and merging with the Unity and the Wholeness of Creation and the Divine Being, and that is what is at the core of the soul. The soul is yearning for and drawing towards God and I've travelled a long way on that journey, and it's frustrating that I haven't been able to do the same on the sexual journey. I kind of wonder what it would be like, let alone the sheer pleasure of having an orgasm with somebody, which I've never done."

Beatrice, who has committed herself to celibacy as a parish priest, reflecting upon the erotic love poetry of St John of the Cross, declared:

"[I]t reminded me first of all of The Song of Songs, this whole idea, the way in which semi-erotic language and a spiritual language go hand-in-hand, can be interchangeable, and often are. The Song of Songs being an obvious way and some of the mystics are of course, people like Mechthild of Magdeburg and people like that, the flowing and all of that – oh yes! And the idea of union and what's all that about? (Laughs heartily) The two things are close and yet, by so many, they are widely separated."

As I consider Beatrice's response, I am taken with her word *interchangeable* to describe the relationship between the sexual and the spiritual, and Linda's term *indistinguishable*, discussed above. I am also aware of her sadness, as she declared that for many Christians the relationship between spiritual union and sexual union was divided. Her sentiment and expression were both palpable and moving. This segued into Beatrice expressing her deep regret that the erotic had been renounced or marginalized in respect of the Christian life. She also revealed how she herself had not had such a strong personal encounter as that of St. John, due to her choice to live as a celibate priest:

"That real element of mystical experience (...) [the erotic] I think is missing today. I'm not sure, speaking personally, that it's something that I've ever experienced that strongly. Probably or partly because that's an aspect of my life I've chosen not to pursue I think that is the reality."

Responding to St. Theresa's poetry, Beatrice shares that she has often used this extract over the years for prayer or mediation groups. She notes that some parishioners' have become somewhat embarrassed by the intermingling of the erotic and sacred metaphors. While others, upon seeing a photograph of the statue of St. Theresa with the Angel leaning down towards her with his long spear in his hand (as depicted in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome), have remarked that such a representation would be unsuitable for a church setting. However, she declares this is what we should all be having, but:

"Not necessarily in that particular form, but a deep experience which involves your body, as well as your soul, if you like, your spirit and bypasses your intellect is really important! And it's available! It's there!"

Beatrice discloses that by embracing celibacy she does not have to define herself too closely, which helps her to manage her contrary feelings about her body and her sexuality. She also wonders about her male sense of being and the issue of transgender. However, she has become more reconciled with her contrary experience of herself and has chosen not to pursue the issue of gender confirmation surgery. While Beatrice has clearly undergone an incredible sex and faith journey, and is at peace with her choice to commit herself to a life of celibacy, I did feel a tinge of sorrow when she said:

"Even though it would be much easier in the context I am in - where we are inclusive church - it would be so much easier if I could simply sit and say, 'Yes, I'm a lesbian and this is my partner!' or something. I kind of regret that. It's almost like I can't join the club really, if you know what I mean? But be true to myself, I think, I stay where I am and hence I will put down celibate as being my preferred option, but I also reckon - not exactly a copout - it lets me off doing some of the soul-searching I might otherwise have done. Some years ago, I did, before I joined the church and was in relationships, then, that's when I was soul-searching."

I was very moved by Beatrice's warmth, candour and integrity. Beatrice went on to discuss and explore the complexities of her sexuality further, and her own journey to date:

"It's far more complex as I suspect it is for many people. I don't think there is, you know, this box heterosexual, this box homosexual, I don't think it does that."

A further complexity that acts as a barrier to Beatrice experiencing sexual ecstasy as a possible means to encountering God relates to her first sexual experience with her uncle when she was a teenager. She does not wish to explore this further, and accordingly I respect her wish. She clearly expresses no blame or guilt. However, this experience coupled with an unpredictable home environment helps Beatrice to share aloud new thoughts and reflections for the first time:

"Always feeling not knowing what was happening or not feeling in control, and I suspect – and this is only really occurring as we talk, as I'm talking to you now – but part of my reluctance to be in any kind of long term sexual relationship, even short term, was about the lack of control. Yeah, the risk that a sexual encounter means that you are out of control, you are not in control of your body, you're not in control of your experience either, because you know, it's about being with another person, it's two of you here, and I found that very difficult."

Beatrice, like Graham, had her sexual boundaries transgressed as a teenager and this added to the complexity of the limitations that have been forged that prevents her from communing with God through sexual passion. Hearing the intricate nature of these barriers, which have prevented Beatrice from enjoying the nearness and blessings of God in sexual ecstasy, was immensely illuminating and touching. This in turn helped me to re-appreciate her palpable sadness and regret, which she had expressed earlier on in the interview, about the erotic being marginalised from the spiritual by the Church: just as the circumstances beyond her control had side-lined her sexual ecstasy in relation to her spiritual ecstasy.

Upon hearing the passionate and somewhat polemical quote from Ken Wilber, during the semi-structured interview, Hugh, responds in the following manner:

“Yes, definitely! I have always been very committed to be very giving to my partner and I think when you find someone who wants to do that for you there is just obviously that care and that love, and in that spirit of giving I think again you find the face of God there. This is an area that applies to all things that we can do in life and bring and give of ourselves then we encounter God. No less than sex and other areas.”

George also resonated with this and became preoccupied with St. John’s notion of, “He struck me on the neck, with his gentle hand, and all sensation left me”, and gradually arrives at the following understanding:

“Christ does not come as a violent warrior, does he? I can see the images of the closeness between God and St. John, of resting and that warmth and intimacy of to be close to the same gender. I suppose the gentle tap suggests to me of coming to my senses, come and know who I really am.”

When asked whether George had experienced a sense of God in his love-making he replied that he had never thought of this important question before. There was a short silence and he began to recount a story of a dear friend who once told him about a male priest who was in a long-term relationship with another man. How, on one occasion, during the throes of passionate love-making, they both cried with joy at feeling both satisfied and spiritually complete through this intense erotic process. At this point George shared that to date he himself had previously experienced a same-sex relationship that lasted for eight months, and reflecting upon the story he had just shared with me, he stated:

“I suppose what I am trying to say, what I experienced from that whole story is what I would like to experience for myself.”

Reflecting on Wilber's hard-hitting quote, claiming that sexual ecstasy can dissolve the definitive boundaries of our skin encapsulated ego and reveal to us our true nature and the face of God, Harriet declared her belief that we laugh because we are confused and embarrassed to let our sexual ecstasy take us further and reveal the presence of God:

"I think that first thing when we laugh, is a lot of what people do is because we don't know what to make of it, and what is going on, and the embarrassment and I ... wonder if I have got there yet. And I think from the little I read or what I picked up, that is where often people will say it will go to in deeper intimacy and things."

For Harriet comprehending and allowing her sexual and spiritual ecstasy to commune in more dialectical terms is something that she has contemplated and read about; and gleaned from conversations with others. She discloses that she does not feel she has gone beyond the veil of sexual ecstasy to encounter the presence of God, and it would appear that this possibility continues to be part of her ongoing and evolving sex and faith journey.

Harriet also has compassionately and courageously tussled with her relationship between her sexual and spiritual ecstasy. She recalled how she received mixed messages from her mother about being a sexual human being. With the support of personal therapy, she has been able to appreciate that she was probably a-sexual during her teenage years and her early twenties that hindered her erotic impulses.

"I was very restrained, repressed."

In sharp contrast to those days, she talks about her current experiences of sexual love-making with her husband, eloquently communicating how this influences her sex and faith life.

"I think it's just an awareness of being valued and somebody cares for you that much. I suppose it is something about significance in contrast to the vastness of the universe. It is a thing that you actually matter, you matter to somebody. I suppose when we look at the vastness, all the stars, do we matter? What is the point of life? Those sorts of things. Well, you matter to somebody this much, type of thing."

Harriet responds to St. Theresa's erotic vision by reverberating with the passionate energy with which she communicates her mystical experience of God. This is followed up by some tender deliberations about those factors that have cast a shadow on her ability to unify her sexual and spiritual impulses in more satisfying ways.

"It's strong and passionate, and I am aware that if anything, I repress that sort of language and don't express things strongly and passionately, and again that is something I learnt from my partner, in that he would express his anger and his passion more strongly than I do for whatever reasons, from upbringing and personality and things."

I came away with a clear sense from my interview with Harriet that she was very much on a journey of discovery, and integrating her sexual and spiritual impulses with greater ease and comfort, in spite of the injunctions she received from her mother and her Charismatic worship, while growing-up into womanhood.

Turning to the heterosexual *coniunctio*, Hugh was impacted by the synthesis between spirituality and sexuality, and specifically the conferment of the latter as sacred through the positioning of the Holy Spirit as a Dove. He notes that:

"The first thing that strikes me is that there is a blessing of sexuality. The fact that the Holy Spirit is presiding over the genital area and obviously the halo at the top."

Furthermore, upon hearing the passionate and somewhat polemical quote from Ken Wilber, during the semi-structured interview, Hugh, responds in the following manner:

“Yes, definitely! I have always been very committed to be very giving to my partner and I think when you find someone who wants to do that for you there is just obviously that care and that love, and in that spirit of giving I think again you find the face of God there. This is an area that applies to all things that we can do in life and bring and give of ourselves then we encounter God. No less than sex and other areas.”

Hugh is unequivocal about finding the face of God through sexual ecstasy with his partner, which he qualifies as equal to other aspects or areas of his life where he might encounter the presence of the Divine. However, earlier on in the interview he did not perceive St. John of the Cross’ language in erotic terms, but interpreted this as more of an example of being intimately connected with God. At a later point he shared the immediate aftereffects of sexual union with his wife:

“A number of things, on a very basic level you feel affirmed in some way and so there is a sense of someone having recognised your value as a person. Particularly if it’s in that loving relationship and it’s something that is highly functional, then it’s the complete opposite of being used as a person, but in that relationship of giving and of that sense of just resting in each other; then there is that, yes, sense of being affirmed.”

At this juncture, I gently shared with Hugh that I could not help but notice his use of the phrase: “that sense of just resting in each other” and said, “So there’s you talking about a sexual experience that’s a loving one ‘resting in each other’ and St. John’s spiritual experience using the same language. That’s fascinating”. To which he replied:

“Yes, I’m comfortable with that.”

Similarly, upon hearing the much more explicit sexual overtones of St. Theresa of Avila’s mystical union with God, Hugh replied:

“I’m familiar with that to some extent. Only insofar as I used to teach a bit of philosophy religion and that included sexual analytical experience. This was referenced sometimes as being an example of possibly wish fulfilment. So, I find hard to hear it without really putting it into that context.”

Later in the interview when viewing the heterosexual *coniunctio*, Hugh ponders its meaning, concluding that:

“Well, that the focus is a purely bodily one and there is that awareness of a conjunction yes bodily conjunction, but not necessarily of spiritual conjunction.”

Clearly, for Hugh the heterosexual *coniunctio* primarily conveyed a bodily union and not a spiritual one. On the back of this response, regarding bodily union, Hugh generously reflected upon his earlier sex life:

“I don’t mind disclosing that the times when I have had a sexual experience with someone where the relationship wasn’t particularly full, and I have not been able to operate on many levels, and you know is all sorts you can say with that, what my mother drummed into me about the importance of the being in love in a sexual relationship, but when I was a younger man I found myself in situations where it was a very empty experience.”

What Hugh brings into the picture, at this point, is the shadow or destructive side of Eros:

“I could equally relate through speaking to others, and through my own experience to some extent, that the dangers of having a blasé attitude towards sex, where the sense of giving is not there and it is just simply just to either be exploited or be exploitative.”

In this regard, for Hugh, Eros is something that needs to be primarily disciplined and tamed (Freud, 1932/1964).

4.2.5 The Shadow Side of Sexuality

In addition to Hugh, five participants talked about the shadow side of sexuality. Specifically, these five participants, that I now discuss in greater detail, wrestled with holding a balance between a positive and generative view of sexuality, as well as its

accompanying shadow. For instance, Beatrice laments the great odds that contemporary people face when trying to encounter God through sexual ecstasy, not because sex is inherently bad, but rather as a result of the de-sacralisation of sex:

"[I]t just seems that an awful lot of what is sold as sex is simply about experience, the pleasure, that's what it's about and not seeing sex as something else. That's part of our Western thing about sex, we value sex at the same time that we're suspicious of it, we value it but we don't entirely know why because we've lost that spiritual element of it."

For Beatrice the C of E has not helped in this regard because it has failed to theologize and provide metaphors and images to re-sacralise sex. Instead, she senses that the Church hierarchy continues to promote sex as an intrinsically dangerous commodity. Beatrice links this to the legacy of the Early Church Fathers' who linked sex to original sin and the transmission of sin. She finds this somewhat odd that the C of E should hold this outdated stance given sex is everywhere and is used to sell things. In other words, by propagating this negative view of sex the C of E continues to contribute to sex being divorced from spirit, and in all probability, somewhat ironically, making sex more alluring due to its deemed danger and 'naughtiness'.

Ruminating on his own sex and faith journey, Gareth, recalls that when there has been bad sex, which has been non-reciprocal and non-mutual, this has led to deep feelings of emptiness and loss.

"[W]hen it's been somebody who just wants to be pleased all of the time, and even though they may be the most gorgeous person in the world, it's all about them, and nothing, nothing, nothing there."

Based upon these difficult experiences, Gareth outlines the quest of sexuality is to integrate and marry this to our spirituality in a mutually affirming and life-giving relationship.

"It's a challenge to make sure that we're not here, there and everywhere, and that is the discipline. It's just learning how to be chaste within it but not necessarily celibate, and understanding the relationship and how you express this. Learning that discipline of love, if you want to call it that, but using it in a way which both fulfils and allows you to grow."

Graham provides salience to the above, when he highlights that sexuality is about the process of learning about sex and its relationship to spirit, particularly as we develop across the human trajectory as sex and spirit.

"We have to learn sexually as much as we learn anything else and as long as you are doing that in a way that is congruent with your age, experience and ability, and being respectful, having been taught to be respectful of the other person, to negotiate and so on. To find the youthful adolescent pleasure and to move on from that to deeper intimate encounters that have depth and length and to be looking for the lifelong other, ultimately, of course."

Grant explains that:

"Sex is a hugely important part of our lives and it has very profound effects on us. However, often we're very unaware of what's going on really, plus sex can be none of those things and actually we can cheapen it, and it can be addictive and it can be destructive."

Harriet concedes that sex indeed can be cheapened and that gay and 'straight' sex can be promiscuous and destructive. However, when it comes to C of E debates about same-sex relationships, it appears to her, that terms like promiscuity are solely directed towards gay people; and she is very clear about the emotions that this provokes and her incredulity that the Church continues to fail to provide a healthy

sexual directive for people to find themselves through the joy of responsible sexual relationships:

"I always get so cross in the whole debate about same-sex relationships saying that they are permissive and promiscuous. Well yes, there is permissive and promiscuous there, as there is in the heterosexual world, and we are not good at encouraging people to work out what is a faithful relationship but equally allowing people to grow and develop and change."

Her point that faithful relationships are not encouraged, nor are people heartened by the Church to explore their sexuality in order to grow, develop and change, has particular resonance with the points made by Graham.

4.2.6 Summary

Our second superordinate theme explored the nature and impact of mystical union through sexual ecstasy for twelve of the participants. An important subtheme, related to three of these twelve participants' testifying to experiencing their sexual ecstasy during a sacred act of worship, which in effect was the reverse process embedded in moments of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004). A further important subtheme worthy of attention was to analyse the transcriptions of those eight participants who revealed the intricate and complex dynamics, both historical and current, that prevented them from receiving moments of mystical union through the veil of sexual ecstasy. For many of these participants' this was clearly a work in progress. Finally, the subtheme of the shadow side of sex was addressed as this related to five participants. Careful attention was paid to teasing out the historical and contextual nature of these concerns. We now turn to the superordinate theme relating to the impact and evocation that the portraits of a heterosexual, gay and lesbian *coniunctio* elicited from the participants'.

4.3 THEME THREE: The Heterosexual, Gay and Lesbian *Coniunctio*

4.3.1 Introduction

These three versions of a *coniunctio* were pivotal in stimulating heterosexual and LGBT participants' phenomenological responses, in addition to the poetry from the Christian mystics and Ken Wilber's quote from the preface of Wade's (2004) publication on transcendent sex. As a visual medium these portraits not only revealed further layers of psychological meaning regarding the distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, but further unveiled the way in which each respondent was aspiring to balance these aspects of humanness in healthy and creative ways; in order to inform their ongoing psychological growth and spiritual development. What transpired from this particular data analysis was a jarring disjunction between the official position espoused by the C of E on the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy and the actual embodied, lived experiences of the participants. Significantly, several non-heterosexual respondents reported a deep sense of confirmation and affirmation from the *coniunctio* that accurately reflected their sexuality, which they agonizingly have yet to receive from an organisation they have faithfully served or continue to serve. Others offered mixed responses and creative suggestions on how to subtract or add to the *coniunctio* to convey a greater balance between sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

4.3.2 Heterosexual *Coniunctio*

Tess was enthralled by the beauty of the heterosexual *coniunctio*. As she gazed upon the portrait, as a transgendered heterosexual woman, there was something profoundly upholding about her gender, spirituality and sexuality that was being communed and mirrored back. Furthermore, she was so visibly moved by the point of conjunction

being rendered that she did not want this to end. This would seem to suggest that this moment, just like the tender and respectful love-making she had experienced with her partner pre-operatively as a gay man and post-operatively as a heterosexual woman, endorsed her sense of Godliness as a woman, and as a sexual and spiritual creature.

"It's beautiful. It could be the original Adam and Eve before they were separated. The Dove is over the genital area as well, communicating that this is sacred and dynamic, too. I don't want them to separate, really. It feels really peaceful with these opposites being together. They're looking out and that feels slightly disturbing in some way. Why are they interested in others, rather than with each other? Unless, they now feel so complete they can look out at the world around them."

Tamara, as a bisexual transgendered woman, had a decidedly opposite reaction to the heterosexual *coniunctio* that activated her feminist critique of Christian patriarchy:

"Well, it conjures up things that I would be uncomfortable with. It conjures up that traditional idea of a woman losing her individuality in a relationship in a sense. My way of reading that, when I saw the one halo, was seeing the man as the hero and the women in need of help."

In contrast to Tess' visible enjoyment of the point of conjunction being displayed, Tamara dislikes the notion of the couple dominating and eclipsing the distinctiveness of the two individual lovers. Accordingly, she would prefer for each to have a halo and a pair of wings to highlight a greater balance between connection and separateness.

"If I had a chance like that, I would suggest intimacy between two individuals and I wouldn't have them amalgamating and joining together. So, there would definitely be two halos and definitely a pair of wings each. Get rid of the extra bits, not that this is anything wrong with ménage a trois, but I am assuming the artist isn't tending to suggest there is a third person. It does look as if someone is standing behind them."

Interestingly, she perceives and senses a third person in this heterosexual *coniunctio*. Tamara discerns in her own mind that this does not amount to a sexual ménage a trois, but rather is something else. My initial association when analysing the data was

to make an interpretative link with the Third (Haule, 2010). After further analysis Coakley's (2013) unfettering of the patriarchal legacy of the Holy Trinity seemed more apposite. Coakley has revised the sacred economy between the three constituent parts of the Holy Trinity in more relational, respectful and equal terms. This inclusive and equalizing call of the Christian life would certainly reverberate with Tamara's feminist critique of the man as the hero and the woman as the victim in need of rescuing.

Hadley, who is himself an accomplished and prolific artist, also had an immediate reaction of dislike about the heterosexual *coniunctio* rating it as unsexy and lacking in beauty. Evidently for him, the erotic and ascetic elements are significantly lacking from this portrait. There is also a deep sense of psychological and theological dissonance with what the picture represents, which is in keeping with Hadley's reciprocal and complementary relationship between his sexual and spiritual ecstasy, which was discussed in the previous superordinate theme. This is revealed when he says:

"I think sexuality is far more complicated, it's not just man and woman, it doesn't all happen down there, in the genital area. I don't see Heaven and Earth as opposites, I see them as integrally linked anyway."

When viewing the heterosexual portrait, Hannah, is reminded of the Holy Spirit with the depiction of the dove, and she associates this image with classical paintings depicting the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and become the mother of Jesus. However, after a short while, Hannah feels that the woman is unhappy and that if her facial expression could be changed this would be a good thing. She then shares her dislike of the lack of visual perspective in the scene, as if to imply that:

"They could be hiding in a corner there and actually I want that sense of the whole world spread out behind them."

Hiding in the corner was reminiscent, in my mind, of Adam and Eve hiding in shame in the Garden of Eden after The Fall. I also wondered about Hannah's strivings to shake-off her Protestant guilt and not hide away from her growing sense of the distinct bond that is deepening between her sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

In Helen's mind, the heterosexual *coniunctio* reminds her of the Book of Genesis when God created man and woman, with the holiness of this humanity being communicated through the presence of the dove to denote the Holy Spirit. While Helen positions her sexual and spiritual ecstasy in dualistic terms, I am somewhat intrigued that when further pondering the sacred and earthly significance of the portrait, she re-cathects with the merging, melting experience that she encountered with her male lover long before she married. At the end of this connection she then qualifies that, for her, the portrait leans more towards the human realm than the Godly one.

"I suppose going back to what I was talking about earlier and that sort of merging into one when you have a sort of particular moving erotic moment that would be the image of it I imagine. Yes, it's sort of that, more person than the relationship with God, I would think. I don't think that the dove placement is particularly relevant I just think the dove is makes this whole thing holy as does the halo."

In sharp contrast, Hugh interprets the heterosexual *coniunctio* as a blessing from God and in line with his concern about the dangers that sexuality holds for him, he makes the following suggestion:

"I would want to show some sort of contrast that somewhere within there that there is a danger as well. I am not quite sure how I would represent it I mean may be just something in the back ground. I suppose the danger would be not turning to face one another."

On a different note, Harriet is touched by the posture of the couple with their heads intimately touching and their arms embracing, which communicate peace and calm. She is struck by the dove concealing the couple's genitalia and the addition of one set of wings and a halo to highlight the sacred, as well as the sexual components, of the picture. She then proclaims:

"It's affirming the goodness of sex is what I feel from that, the embrace and the spirit over the genitals."

After a short while she expresses concern about the lack of polarities being depicted in the portrait and suggests that to achieve this, further colours and supplementary archetypal metaphors would be needed, such as pleasure and danger, and God and the Devil. My sense here, is that Harriet is striving towards a more balanced relationship between her sexual and spiritual ecstasy, which was clearly missing during her teenage years and early adulthood. In more specific terms she proposes the following alterations to the heterosexual *coniunctio*:

"I think a bright red and more black would make it feel more dangerous, more fiery and erotic: beware you are in dangerous territory here! In a sense you could add the opposite to this you could have what looks like a Devil over the genitals (Whether we believe in a Devil or not). In a sense to recognise that tussle."

Henry's initial response is to smile as he surveys the heterosexual *coniunctio* and then he swiftly makes a potent theological connection with the Holy Trinity, which once again is evocative of Haule's (2010) Third:

"[I]t's quite interesting isn't it because it is a man and a woman, but it's almost one. It's got that Trinitarian, One is Three, and Three is One: the bird penetrating in and the embracing around, they are separate but they are One and that's rather nice."

Additionally, he enjoys their disinhibited and unashamed posture, but wonders if they are not wrapped-up in each other enough. However, after a short while he senses that the couple being portrayed are rather haughty in their demeanour, which he interprets and immediately dislikes as the psychological and theological seal of approval favoured and defended by the C of E.

“Because it links with the faces that look a bit, ‘Look at us, we’re a bit pleased, we’re looking out’. Smug. Why do I say smug? It’s to do with, well, it’s the Gold Star, isn’t it!”

He then becomes suspicious that the dove or Holy Spirit is covering their genitalia to hide their embarrassment. He advises that by painting their genitals in the portrait this would create a greater balance between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. He then recommends that the halo is removed and that the dove is repositioned and depicted hovering above them, extending its wings around them in an embrace.

Howard is equally uneasy and dissatisfied with the representation of the dove, as the Holy Spirit, covering-up their genitalia. For him this is too indicative of the guilt-laden and shame-laden history that continues beleaguer Christianity’s inability to integrate sexual and spiritual ecstasy in life-affirming and life-giving ways. He states:

“It reminds me of the fig leaf and I hope it’s not a symbol of embarrassment. I would like to have seen their genitalia or some representation of it. In so many biblical paintings Adam and Eve have their genitals covered, because they were ashamed. In Genesis they realized they were naked and so they made themselves fig leaves. I would hate to think that the Holy Spirit or the dove was hiding something out of embarrassment.”

For both Henry and Howard, the sexual libido needs to be more accentuated within the heterosexual *coniunctio* to forge a better balance with the religious libido. This is clearly

something which the C of E continues to struggle to address in more positive and generative ways.

For Leonard-Barry, the heterosexual *coniunctio* speaks of gentleness and openness. The couple are very much together but not in an exclusive way. However, he is unsure about the Holy Spirit covering up the genital area. In particular he appreciates:

"[T]he two, the one flesh and that they're looking out, obviously engaged with but not absorbed by one another."

His response is redolent of his experiences of mystical union through sexual ecstasy, whereby his anxiety dissipates and he does not feel driven or compelled to prove his love for others. Rather, he is open to the world and as a result he can flow with communing with others in a relaxed, responsive and reciprocal manner.

Beatrice viewed the heterosexual *coniunctio* first and then the lesbian representation afterwards, which is discussed below. Her playful side is initially constellated as she exclaims with an infectious double entendre:

"My first and initial thought is that Dove's in a strategic place. I wonder what he's doing, 'Eye, eye!' He's getting an eyeful isn't he! Sorry, that's just my first response, sorry!"

Our shared raucous laughter gradually subsided and then after some moments of quiet cogitation, Beatrice remarked:

"I'd probably want to add some genitals to it, that's in part what I want to add, because I think that's a cop out not to do that. I don't think it's an image I feel totally related to. I still think that Dove is in a funny place!"

Somewhat solemnly, after a significant pause, she wondered whether the idea of reaching such a state of physical and spiritual union was rather idealised; and questioned whether this was indeed ever achievable in this life. She was left with mixed feelings marked by competing expectations and hopes that seemed to correlate with those historical and personal complexities that had acted as a barrier to the possibility of mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy. Beatrice expressed this in the following way:

“Yeah, a glimpse or maybe it’s only something that happens in heaven? Who knows? Maybe that’s what the wings and halo are about. Is it possible on earth or is not?”

4.3.3 Lesbian *Coniunctio*

Upon viewing the lesbian *coniunctio*, Beatrice has a warmer and integral response to what is being pictured:

“That looks more like a comforting image than the other one (heterosexual coniunctio), in a sense: more contented with an element of friendship. In a way the one with the two women conveys a sense of equality and mutuality.”

Beatrice signals that she would like to add beautiful jewellery to the lesbian *coniunctio* because, she declares, these women should be celebrated.

Linda, similarly, has a positive reaction upon viewing the lesbian conjunction. The first adjective that she uses is “beautiful” as she identifies with the figures in the painting that correspond to her own preferred sexual orientation and her current same-sex relationship.

“It’s beautiful and I can certainly identify with it!”

In particular, Linda is attracted to the beauty of the couple and the intertwining of the figures; and that of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, along with the explicit message of communion or oneness. She explains her attraction thus:

"Well, the attraction of the two and there is that sense of two people but the oneness of it as well, which is nice and the certain tenderness and joy. It touches something quite deep in me, because it's about sexuality and spirituality, and attraction and beauty, and the actual sensuality of the flesh - a joy really!"

This image clearly resonated with Linda that celebrated something deep within her, that from my perspective championed the incredibly courageous journey she has taken: falling in love with another woman, leaving the convent and effectuating her relationship sexually and spiritually with her lover.

On this spiritual note, she especially appreciated the religious overtones of sexual celebration and verification:

"I like the halo on top and the beauty and the reality of a true relationship, and it is holy. Where there is love, there is God."

Shortly after this point she connected with her sadness because some people are unable to see the life-affirming nature of sexual and spiritual ecstasy within a lesbian relationship. This sadness is then replaced with a greater resolve to live her life in accordance with her integrity and with how she chooses to live out her sex and faith journey as a C of E priest.

"The sad pain is that a lot of people don't see it like that, but I'm beginning to get to the point that it doesn't matter what other people think, definitely, you know, because that's the reality (pointing to the picture), and it's to be celebrated."

For both Linda and Beatrice, the lesbian *coniunctio* is something to be celebrated and adorned with beauty.

Tamara has a similar reaction with the lesbian *coniunctio* as she did with the heterosexual depiction, discussed earlier. For Tamara, the point of merging jars with her experiences and her feminist politics:

"I don't like the blending together. While it doesn't have the connotations of male-female inequality, it looks like they're being treated as a married couple and not as two individuals. So, I'm still not comfortable with the blending together. So, for me, the only difference between the two is that the heterosexual picture provokes a stronger negative reaction, because I naturally read it as the man's halo. I think it's a rare thing for a woman to break away from the relationship with the man, because the man wants to control. When it's a sexual relationship between two women they can (doesn't always happen) be themselves and breakaway from that relationship. So that is the difference I would see between the two."

As I wondered about Tamara's comments, I was mindful of the historical hostilities that she had grown up with in Northern Ireland. At one point during the interview, as she ruminated about her childhood experiences, she referred to how she tried to be a peacemaker with Roman Catholics during a Civil War. The violence and hatred propagated by, mostly, men would have had a profound impact on Tamara's worldview that to me was unimaginable. In addition, she also disclosed that prior to her gender confirmation surgery, her Diocesan Bishop had been most sympathetic and supportive, encouraging her to step down as a C of E priest from her current post, undergo her surgery and once fully restored she could return to a new post to exercise her vocation as a parish priest. Once her surgery had been completed the Bishop revoked her license rendering her unable to practise as a C of E priest, and duly informed her that there were no posts available in his Diocese. So, Tamara knew first-hand, the abuse and misuse of patriarchal power, and hence, perhaps her jarring

response to the point of conjunction in both paintings, signalling to her an overwhelming sense of enmeshment that renders her powerless.

4.3.4 Gay *Coniunctio*

Glen is taken with the beauty of the gay *coniunctio*, which reminds him of the two natures of Christ as God and man.

“It’s like two becoming one in an act of sexual union. Both bringing something to complete the whole. There’s no duplication and they’re quite different. So, one would assume, in a sense, that they are complementary, with an e.”

Glen is surprised by his response and tangibly moved by the image, and equally saddened that the hierarchy of the C of E would never disseminate such an image for discussion, or publish this as an affirmative stance about gay love thereby affirming the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

Greg, is equally transported by the beauty of the portrait and he sees within it intimacy and tenderness in the embrace:

“Well, intimacy is there, clearly, and an embrace. They seem very relaxed and there is an ease in that place. It feels like it’s captured a moment that isn’t going anywhere. I don’t envisage what might happen next or what happened before. What’s there is what there is and that is a beautiful thing in its own right. They’re very happy and it’s very tender and very intimate. The fact that what they have together is blessed and that sense of when I talked about completion or whole in the other is expressed in that as well. The unity they’re enjoying is a blessed thing.”

His interpretation of the picture is in keeping with his experiences of *Unio Mystica* not being exclusively tied to sexual orgasm, but during the tender love-making between him and his partner, being there together, in the moment.

While Gabriel is adamant that he has never had a mystical experience through ecstatic sex, and concedes that others may indeed be privy to such revelations, he nonetheless shares his instant joy of both feeling affirmed by the gay *coniunctio* and inspired by the defiance of the two men, as they unite and delight in their bonds of mutual affection and physicality. He then notices the single halo and one set of angel's wings:

"The halo! The angel's wings! I guess they're sharing a pair of them too and that sense of merging between the two bodies. So, it's saying, to me, to those who would tear these things apart: "Yeah, and your problem is?" So, I completely agree with what its saying."

Seemingly, Gabriel feels affirmed by this symbolic image: the goodness and Godliness of his sex and faith life are celebrated, along with his own integrity and defiance to keep faith with the choices he has made about his preferred sexuality and lifestyle; regardless of the C of E's stance on same-sex relationships for its clergy. This also resounds with Linda's ruminations on this very issue, which was discussed earlier.

When comparing this gay *coniunctio* with the heterosexual one, Leonard-Barry also perceives a sense of boldness and rebelliousness in their stature, and how this representation:

"[S]ums up a lot of my sense about the Holy not being exclusive but incorporating, holding together, and celebrating. Yes, there is a celebration about these two which I didn't pick up about the other one. Perhaps nearer in making love. Very affirming!"

Gregory initially warms to the beauty of the gay unification but then critiques it as unsophisticated, and redolent of the dualistic and dichotomous legacy embedded in Christianity, that splits the created order into heaven/earth, male/female and spirit/sex. Gareth also has a mixed reaction about the gay *coniunctio*: there are parts of the picture that he likes and parts he dislikes. He senses a certain kind of self-satisfaction or smugness which interestingly was Henry's reaction when viewing the heterosexual

coniunctio above. However, Gareth can appreciate the unity being displayed by the one halo and one set of angel's wings, and underscores that for the couple, and by implication for himself, that:

"[T]hey only find completeness in the togetherness and that togetherness is brought together and blessed by that singleness or halo."

This interpretation has particular resonance for Gareth, when at one point in the interview he asserts that he has not been called to a life of Christian celibacy. On the contrary, his partner of 12 years makes him feel complete and fortified to carry out God's work in his parish setting.

Likewise, Gerald reacts unfavourably to, as he sees it, the perceived smugness that is inferred by the gay *coniunctio*. He was pleased that they are naked and discernibly disappointed that their genitalia are hidden. For Gerald, the lack of genitalia desexualizes their union and the halo and wings over-spiritualizes the relationship. I interpreted this as an all too familiar symbolization of his journey as a young curate in the 1960's when the Franciscan Friars tried to dissuade him from embracing and integrating his sexual ecstasy with his spiritual calling as a C of E priest. Notwithstanding, his own manifest manoeuvres and gestures to deny and sublimate his own homoerotic desire that in the earlier part of his adult years were the cause of great pain, shame and self-loathing on this front. In order to get the sexual and spiritual impulses in a homeostatic relationship he suggests the following alterations to the picture:

"It would be rather nice to have another couple in there where they are having a filthy row and the wings are slightly bent and battered, and some of the feathers have fallen out."

And in terms of de-idealizing this version of gay love and re-sexualizing the conjunction, so that it is in a right spirit with the religious impulse, Gerald comments:

"Well it doesn't seem very sexual to me because they're not about to have wild penetrative sex as far as I can see. It's more quietly being together and enjoying each other's bodies, which is very important of course, but it does seem idealistic. I'd have other little couples floating round having wild sex or arguments."

Similarly, Grant dislikes the idealization of the gay *coniunctio* and remarks that the couple look too much alike, and that greater difference is needed.

"So, I'd have a bit more difference in terms of colour or age even, or something that would bring in difference. Maybe it's an idealised form and it just hits me as idealised and I think they're too much the same."

I am intrigued by the request for greater difference to be embedded in the painting. In classical psychoanalytic terms, sameness, as in two women or two men being in a same-sex relationship, was the measurement used to insist that this was a manifestation of narcissism. Unknowingly, perhaps, Grant is underscoring the importance of difference at a more textured, nuanced and complex level of appreciation, rather than the broad and singular category of gender to purport a theory of narcissism.

Grant exclaims that the gay *coniunctio* is too nice. On the issue of being nice, Grant quickly relates this to the fact that as a parish priest he has to be, by and large, nice with parishioners and strangers that he meets during his working week. Hence, he links his antipathy towards the picture with his abhorrence of his niceness which he has to impart when he ministers to others as a C of E priest. This could be a further layer of meaning to make sense of Grant having his nipples pierced as a way of

counter-balancing his heterosexual persona and secretly subverting his *modus operandi* of being nice.

Geoffrey, who holds his sexual and spiritual impulses in a dualistic relationship, is unimpressed with the gay *coniunctio* and remarks that, for him, it lacks credibility and clout:

"Because it's a more serious thing that you are proposing. I think because that takes in a whole sort of nature of, for me, unhelpful imagery in that it tries to transform someone into something else. Whereas, I am interested in the nature of the reality of the love they have for each other, because that will reflect in a spiritual way, anyway."

For Geoffrey, the *coniunctio* lacks a grittiness to capture the chthonic nature of gay sex and love, alongside its beauty and tenderness. As a result, he feels that this trivializes the intention of the portrait.

George, who hopes that one day he might partake in the mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy with a male-lover, connects with the message about the physical and spiritual nature of love. He senses that the picture communicates:

"[W]hat love ultimately is and the deep physical and spiritual elements connecting the two individuals exclusively to one another ... but this needs to be more robust and a bit more real. I think I would have the genitalia included without a doubt."

For Graham the gay conjunction says something about androgyny and the simultaneous nature of two human figures merging while holding their separateness:

"There's a distinction as well, a reaching out, they're looking out, they're smiling, they're happy together, it doesn't matter whether they are male or female, or two males or two females."

4.3.5 Summary

Of the twenty-two participants' eight (Hugh, Linda, Beatrice, Glen, Greg, Gabriel, Leonard-Barry and Tess) responded favourably to the *coniunctio* that matched their sexuality. This subsequently evoked an immediate and spontaneous sense of affirmation and celebration about their unique relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. A remaining four (Hadley, Geoffrey, Gerald and Tamara) contributors reacted unfavourably, while one respondent (Helen) saw her *coniunctio* in more human terms, indicating the celebration of human sexuality. The remaining nine (Hannah, Harriet, Henry, Howard, Gareth, Grant, Gregory, George and Graham) respondents made creative suggestions as to how the conjunction, that matched their sexuality, could be further enhanced and integrated in line with their own sex and faith journey. So, in total seventeen of the twenty-two participants felt fully met or partially met in respect of their distinct relationship between their sexual and religious impulses. In a unique sense these participants were provided with an opportunity to react, respond and interact with a symbolic presentation of the unifying nature between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a manner in which the C of E has, thus far, failed to realise.

4.4 THEME FOUR: The House of Bishops and the C of E Hierarchy

4.4.1 Introduction

What was fascinating about this significant superordinate theme was that it emerged from the final question embedded in the semi-structured interview. Namely, "Is there anything you would like to share further about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality as a Church of England priest that my questions have thus far not elicited?" Without exception, participants expressed critical concerns about the C of E's

reluctance to affirm, theologically, spiritually and ethically, a positive and inclusive message about the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, for heterosexual and non-heterosexual clergy and laity. Various reasons were proffered as to why this might be so, with respondents highlighting the harmful impact that such a world-denying, body-denying and sex-denying despatches continues to exert upon them and non-heterosexual people in general. In the participant information sheet that was initially distributed, it clearly stated that the research project was not a polemical venture; and yet, at the end of the interview process socio-political sensibilities, borne out of heterosexual and LGBT clergy men and women's direct experience of the Church's hierarchy came to the fore, as a noteworthy theme for our attention.

Hadley, an energetic and passionate parish priest, longs for the C of E hierarchy to:

"[R]eflect on sexuality more because I think it has direct links to the way we move forward in a more understanding way about ministry and it has a direct correlation on our pastoral care."

On further reflection, for Hadley, the C of E's hierarchy are:

"[U]ltra afraid of it (sex) and maybe we're getting somewhere with some of the Christian mystics but then, bang goes The Reformation, and maybe threw out the baby with the bathwater as it was starting to incubate. Maybe it's the last taboo. Jonah doesn't think that God is in the sea but we realise that He was and maybe we're trying to deny the fact that God's in the sex and in a big way; and actually, sex is all over the Bible and I think it starts, almost with sexual union."

Linda also senses fear at the heart of the Church's struggle to reconcile and promote a healthy relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy and laity.

“They don’t understand it at all and I think the Church is absolutely petrified about the subject of sexuality, which is sad because a lot of the Christian mystics just talked about spirituality in terms of eroticism, which makes a lot of sense and is understandable; and that is not easily handled by the Church.”

At one point, Linda recounts her twenty-plus years as a celibate nun living in a convent. After falling in love with a woman she renounced her life vows to consummate this relationship and this continues to be a source of happiness, joy and support. Retrospectively, she notes that:

“My upbringing in the Church had not enabled me to get in touch with what an important thing sexuality was, as a part of being completely human, and then I fell in love with someone. Well I have fallen in love with people before but this was in a very different way because it was mutual, and really, I came to a new understanding of what sexuality and spirituality meant together. I’d really been in denial about that and I think the Church had reinforced that kind of attitude because it was not affirming sexuality at all, but it was constantly frightened of it.”

As a consequence of her incredible sex and faith journey, Linda concludes that the Church should rejoice at any signs of love, rather than closing proverbial doors in people’s faces.

It is interesting to note that Leonard-Barry, regardless of his fine capacity to wrestle with and challenge the C of E’s official teaching on sexuality and spirituality, does not offer any critical perspective on how the hierarchy should be conducting such matters. Instead, he expressed his deep gratitude for not being raised in a religious family. Thus, he was drawn to the Christian faith and the C of E not because of some enthralling doctrine but because of intimate and loving relationships, and this has made him feel amazingly free. This in turn has equipped him to hold the C of E proclamations on sexual and spiritual ecstasy lightly, and live more authentically and be true to himself on such issues.

When I posited my final open-ended question to Tamara, her feminist and socio-political sensibilities that she holds at the core of her sex and faith journey come to the fore:

"I have been talking about sexuality and spiritually, which is something that is naturally healing. The Church of England hierarchy are driving themselves out of existence with the current policies because sexuality in all its varieties, including asexuality, is part of the human condition. Every time a Bishop stands-up and wants to proclaim there is only particular, very limited type of sexuality it reinforces patriarchy and another candle of love for the Church of England is blown-out. Either in the mind of someone needing to defend themselves from such a proclamation or a person thinking that is my sister, that's my work colleague, that's my neighbour you're are talking about. If you are going to talk about my friends and relatives like that I don't really want to know you. The Bishops just have to wake up and smell the coffee and realise that if they do not the Church of England is lost, like the dinosaurs."

On a gentler note, as Tess takes stock of her own journey, from a lifelong gay relationship prior to her gender confirmation surgery, to that relationship continuing as an opposite-sex Christian marriage post-operatively, she asserts:

"I feel I've been engaged in a journey about trying to integrate sexuality and spirituality and gender. The Church doesn't seem to be very good at having these kinds of conversations. I think the Church is missing out by not having the conversations and by not exploring it."

Hannah is acutely aware of the hierarchy's inability to reconcile sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and is equally gratified to have a clear directive from the Pilling Report forbidding Diocesan Director of Ordinands to ask personal questions about the sex lives or preferences of gay people who are considering priesthood. She clearly takes her responsibility to the C of E seriously, while simultaneously being committed to challenging the need for change:

"I'm under the discipline of the Church and I will agree to abide by the decisions of the Church. This does not mean I like them and doesn't mean that I won't seize

the opportunity to work for change. Just to say to people, 'OK, what does the bible really say? What does the bible say about commitment, and covenant, and love, and faithfulness, and understanding and mutual self-giving?' It says an awful lot more about those things than it does about the marriage about one man and one woman."

This is Hannah's message to the Episcopate on the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, particularly as this relates to non-heterosexual clergy and laity:

"I am sorry Bishop, the world is thinking differently on this one and actually the Church is not there to always say we have the answer to this, and you've got it wrong and may be the Holy Spirit is working through people outside the Church as well."

Similarly, Harriet is respectful of her calling to abide by the decisions of her Diocesan Bishop and the House of Bishops, while instantaneously being aware of the put downs for being a female priest by male colleagues who do not concur with her standing as a clergy woman, let alone the disregard she witnesses for non-heterosexual Christians. However, she notes her resolve to live out her faith of respecting difference within her daily and weekly interactions with others, in spite of the disregard she is at times shown:

"Yes, and the put downs, and we are trying as a diocese, of keeping everybody together and respecting people's differences, and trying very generously to do that."

Helen is visibly frustrated by the C of E's anxiety about sex and sexuality, and sexuality and gender, and what people are doing with each other in terms of sex.

"We spend too much time in the church worrying about sexuality and not just gender, etc. but about what people are doing or what people are not doing. There is nowhere in the New Testament that goes on about sexuality and of course there are inclinations about sexuality, and I think to me, that is sort of how life is. Life works and sex is part of that but it is not the main part of it. Unless you are a sex worker, perhaps, and I don't have issues with people who are sex workers."

She believes that the current crisis and contentious divide between those who accept or struggle about the issue of women priest and bishops or LGBT clergy is because the House of Bishops are afraid to take a positive and affirmative lead on such issues.

"I think the Church hierarchy is frightened to make decisions. As a parish priest I am sort of a microcosm of the Church hierarchy. If I think something is right then I will just go ahead and do it. If you don't like it, you can challenge me and I can apologise afterwards. But I prefer to apologise than to get permission first, and I feel the church hierarchy needs to take decisions that maybe are painful: you can't not do things because they are painful. I think the problem with the Church now, with women bishops, sexuality, gender, gay priests, etc. whatever, is because they won't lead the people."

In a similar vein to Helen, Howard believes that the House of Bishops need to lead the C of E with greater courage, and affirm, confirm and celebrate different sexualities amongst its priests and laity. In this regard he makes an important parallel with women being ordained as priests, and his initial reactions, at that time, to this seismic shift in Anglican ecclesiology.

"I think we have to be a lot braver, I really do, and more authentically powerful. I know it's incredibly difficult because we are part of the Anglican Communion. I know about Africa and all the problems and Archbishop Justin Welby saying that we have to consider other Christians in the world who could be murdered if we affirm same-sex relationships. But, if we believe that a certain way is right. I remember when women priests came in. I was quite ambivalent about that at the time when something is seemed to be believed to be right and authentically right, rather than pleasing in one's cup. I think we have to be bold and I wish the Church was bolder or had more energy or more gumption, really, I wish it was sexier. Use some of the sexual power that we have been talking about to rediscover its core."

Similarly, Henry believes that the Church should be much more positive about sex *per se*, and dispense with one rule for this group of people and another rule for that group of people. Henry suspects that behind these rulings about sexual and spiritual ecstasy is an anxious and defensive hierarchy afraid of losing its authority and power.

"It feels very defensive. There's an anxiety about it. I wonder if it's connected with a hideous hierarchical view of marriage because the one thing that same-sex

relationships will do - every couple is a couple and people behave as they behave - but there's no built-in gender hierarchy. It may be that some people are more committed to a more hierarchical view of marriage and authority within, and hierarchical views of God, nice circles and pictures, and therefore mutual relationships might undermine that, but that would be good! Why other people wanting to be in a same-sex relationship is remotely going to affect anyone's choice to get married: to affirm that would seem to me to be consistent with affirming marriage."

Considering the role the C of E is adopting on the issue of sexual and spiritual ecstasy in respect of same-sex unions, Hugh is concerned that this is missing a fortuitous opportunity to focus on the shadow side of a society dedicated to sexual consumerism.

"My concern is that the conversation should be more about the dangers that one faces in taking an ambivalent and recreational attitude towards sex, which is hugely rife amongst young people, as I am sure you are aware. It is the darkness to be found in the consumer attitude towards sex, which I worry about and I think we have not had enough opportunity to express or for the Church to be heard on that because all that seems to be coming out is the worries about homosexual priests or homosexual members; and apart from anything else that is really bad piece of public relations."

Hugh concedes that:

"I have to say that I am still open to this debate (same-sex unions) and I am still forming in my own head my responses to it, but instinctively I have no problem with a loving sexual relationship, no matter what that sexuality is that is involved. I believe very strongly that it's completely possible and blessed to have a loving homosexual relationship and I am also, through the people I have met, convinced that there is not much choice involved in being a homosexual man or woman."

Beatrice was critical about the C of E's outdated and out of touch stance about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. In effect, she sensed that the Church colludes with contemporary society's dominant view that sexuality and sex are singularly tied to eroticism (in its narrowest sense of the word), in terms of achieving an orgasm or sexual gratification in itself, thereby making sex a commodity to be consumed. As a result, Beatrice believes that:

"We see it (sex) as a physical act without spiritual consequence and the trouble is that the Church is so busy ... saying: 'No, you can't have sex before marriage, it's only about the procreation of children' that it's lost its spiritual pathway, too, and that's very sad, very sad indeed."

She further reveals that based on her direct experiences the C of E assumes that if you are single then you are not sexual. She feels that the biggest challenge facing the C of E today is not gay men – and she evidently appreciates the hurt the C of E habitually causes by discriminating against gay male priests who faithfully serve the church – but the issue of single women; and indeed, single women or single men.

“It is simply assumed that if you are single you are not a sexual being which is a completely unrealistic expectation, because of course we are! Speaking personally, I sometimes think ... somebody needs to notice that there are a lot of single people for one reason or another, and that single people are also sexual beings and need to know that it's ok to be such a being.”

Gabriel is aware that the official line of the C of E does not assent to the importance of the relationship between gay sexuality and spirituality. As a result, there is a mismatch or disjunction between this participant's lived experience as a gay priest and the slim documents published by the C of E. For the most part, he gets on exercising his priesthood in a relatively rewarding way as a non-celibate gay clergyman. However, when another statement is released about non-heterosexual people from the Church House Press Office or a statement on gay marriage is issued from Lambeth Palace he ultimately feels devalued and marginalized. So, when the C of E rejected the possibility of any discussion about the feasibility of gay marriage, he felt an important opportunity to openly discuss gay sexuality and spirituality was uncaringly dismissed and demeaned, which was exactly how he felt at that time of the announcement. His Bishop was a great source of comfort and support on this occasion.

“On that occasion I was writing an email to my Bishop and I thought, ‘Why am I bothering?’ The Bishop got it and he phoned immediately and he just said, ‘I am so sorry. There were many of us who argued against this’.”

Gareth replies to the last question of the semi-structured interview in the following way:

"I mean you've not mentioned the Church of England as a specific. We have been talking very much about individuals under God and relationships under God. Clearly the way in which the Church of England has set up 'Issues in Human Sexuality' as a sort of thing to be decided by old men sitting in their purple shirts, in a closed room in London that's not got anything to do with God and it's got nothing to do with spirituality. That's the old sort of power thing which is what old men wearing gold crosses around their necks think that they're supposed to be doing."

For Gareth there is a perilous divide between what the Church hierarchy officially propagates about the relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and the devastating impact this has, particularly on non-heterosexual priests, in terms of their ongoing psychological development and spiritual growth. Essentially, how this perilous divide enforces a duplicitous lifestyle, marked by inauthenticity and an impoverished lack of wholeness. Gareth spells this out, explicitly, with heartfelt passion:

"If they actually got it right and started thinking more about spirituality and more about care of ... their clergy ... leaving clergy to do the work of tilling the soil and making sure that there are disciples around in all the churches, in all the parishes, then you need whole priests to do that: you don't need people who are in a closet, or people who are trying to be something that they are not, or people who are not happy with what they are and would rather have done that, than this, and therefore they live with their wives by day and then go out cottaging, or dogging, or sauna experiences or whatever when they can."

He goes on:

"No, we want people who are whole, who are rounded, who have everything that they need in their domestic as well as their ecclesiastical environment and have the support beyond to say, 'You're are doing a good job. You're a great human being. You've got a fantastic home set up. You're contributing a huge amount to your own church and beyond, well done! Keep on at it – you've our full support.' Now, that ought what Bishops to be doing and that's what the Church should be encouraging and its tragic that people are being forced into saying, 'Well, we live together. We have a civil partnership merely for the legal status it gives us; and the fact that we have some legal security in terms of the house; and the fact that we bought a house together to move into. Of course, we sleep in separate beds, and although we go on holiday together we have twin beds in the hotel.' It's just forcing people to lie and that's not good for the individuals and it's not good for the institution, which makes those requirements of the individuals."

For Geoffrey, the House of Bishops is an irrelevance, which he suspects is the case for many other clergy down on the ground doing the work of a parish priest. For him there are voices in the wilderness, both old and new, that speak to him of a cutting-edge Christianity that continues to shape and inform his sex and faith journey.

“Harry Williams ... True Resurrection, written in the 1950’s keeps coming back to me and resonates in different ways. I age. I move on. The Richard Holloway books. Thomas Merton’s ... Seven Storey Mountain has had a profound effect. Bishop David Jenkins came to teach us, occasionally, and here again it was the joy of the questions. It was the same sort of things that James Alison is now writing about, the Dominican that got thrown out for being gay. He asks the questions and sometimes it’s like putting a mirror-up in front of you and you keep thinking, ‘I wish you hadn’t asked that because now I have to go away and think about it.’ Richard Rohr ... has the ability to do what James Alison does, of putting a mirror-up and you can either look at it or you can pass it on. David’s (Jenkins) teaching haunts me. I hear that voice. I hear the voice and the encouragement and the shared doubting that he did with you as he walked with you as his clergy and he would ring you up out of nowhere and say, ‘Where is God in all of this?’ He was genuinely asking the question which for me has always been a very helpful process for helping me to move on as well.”

George was consciously aware of his same-sex desire while growing-up in a small village in Wales. His parents and the local Church made it clear about the unacceptability about non-heterosexual identities and lifestyles, and as a young person George learnt to be an agreeable and polite young man. However, in spite of this familial and hierarchical condemnation he discovered in God, not only a place of refuge, but an unconditional acceptance and with the resulting spatial distance from his village that he grew-up in, he has now negotiated greater freedom to be authentic.

“Certainly, my spirituality and my journey of faith is closely interlinked with my childhood and adolescence. From a gay person’s perspective, from my perspective, God was a refuge because I think God has carried me, in a broken way I suppose, because He allowed me to be able to survive. I’m 39 now and I have been able to reconcile my sexuality with my spirituality through the invitation from God to be true to myself and now with distance, it’s beautiful, and perhaps there is a chance from this distance that I can allow myself to do this.”

After many decades of service as a parish priest, Gerald looks back from the vantage point of retirement, to ruminate about his many years of ministry and his socio-political activism about affirming non-heterosexual clergy and laity. My final open-ended question evokes a sharp retort that then reveals a catalogue of personal hurt, betrayal and injustice. In particular, he feels deeply disappointed by previous Archbishops' of Canterbury and the current Archbishop.

"We haven't talked about the Church of course and I think that has a lot to answer for. I still haven't heard ... an Archbishop actually say that gay loving is good and to be commended and the question is, "How do you love?" They're all far too frightened to say anything like that."

He also feels disgusted by Evangelical Christians who have been homophobic towards him and his identity as a gay priest, and how the hierarchy has not only colluded with this but refuses to make a positive statement in defense of non-heterosexual Christians. Consequently, he feels embarrassed and let down by the Church and could not in all conscience encourage gay people to consider priesthood as a vocation.

Glen shared the impact that the C of E hierarchy exerts upon him as a parish priest, describing the House of Bishops as a 'top-down' dynamic. He declared his relationship with the Church hierarchy's teaching on sexual and spiritual ecstasy, midway during his interview. He noted that based on his direct conversations with his non-heterosexual clergy colleagues, they push against the hierarchy's teaching on the dualistic nature of sexuality and spirituality by adopting a Christo-centric, 'bottom-up' approach: a Jesus who does not obsessively talk about heterosexual marriage all of the time, like the C of E, and a Jesus who has the most intimate embrace with his beloved disciple, St John. I was fascinated by his use of the terms "top" and "bottom". In current gay culture these words denote those men who prefer to anally penetrate

another man (top) and those men whose preference is to be anally penetrated (bottom) during same-sex male intercourse. How indeed, “top-down” can be oppressive, even abusive. He concludes:

“So, any sense of the right way to behave or to live or to have sexual relations is just thrown out by that, by that ‘bottom up’: very earthy, gospel centred, portrait of The Christ. So, I’ll stick with that rather than Some Issues with Human Sexuality, if I may!”

Likewise, his use of the phrase “bottom-up” to indicate the inspiration that he takes from an earthy Christ to guide his sex and faith life (rather than listening to the oppressive strictures outlined in *Some Issue with Human Sexuality* “from above”) is highly evocative of Pannenberg’s (1968) critique. How an over-spiritualized theology can not only woefully misalign with various Christians’ embodied experiences of their faith, but also be used to subjugate and oppress those who do not measure-up to such lofty axioms.

Graham, like Glen, also takes issue with the Church’s insistence about the primacy of monogamy in respect of the life of faith. He argues that while this creates safety, it ultimately forbids people experiencing passionate exploration and experimentation in their love-making, closing them off from God in the process, prior to any lifelong commitment to fidelity being reached and negotiated. By implication, for Graham, the C of E’s narrow approach to sexuality and spirituality through biblical authority, orthodoxy and tradition results in prescribed dictates that are out of touch with contemporary society. He goes on to articulate what he believes the Church hierarchy should be promoting about sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and he reminds himself of what he feels compelled to teach in this regard:

"If we said that to adult after adult: it's a core part of you; your sexual desire is healthy; God given and natural. Spiritual evocation is natural. There's this rich beautiful core in you that can just burst with pleasure at beauty or whatever. That's the divine in you. That's what The Church, that's what priests, that's what I need to learn to say more and more to people that brings them alive and connects their heart and soul."

Interestingly, Grant does not overtly criticize the C of E hierarchy or the House of Bishops. Instead, he appears to carry the burden of the Church's inability to provide an official and upholding message about same-sex relationships and the distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy. He explains that:

"As a gay priest I've deliberately chosen to compromise, to a certain extent, how I present myself to the general public, because of the need to maintain a sense of mutual respect for the office of a priest. That also has led me to present in a way that people don't automatically assume that I'm gay and then of course they make assumptions that you're not."

Meanwhile, Greg is baffled by the hierarchy's obsession with the sexual act when discussing issues of Christian faith and human sexuality, in this manner marginalizing and overlooking the centrality of intimacy.

"Intimacy is a dimension of relationship that the Church is very poor at understanding because the Church tends to get all hot under the collar about sex and the nature of relationships. Particularly where you've got same-sex relationships or even heterosexual relationships where they're not married. I can't grasp this notion that all people seem to think about is sex and they don't seem to see or understand intimacy within that."

He continues with his sense of feeling confounded by the hierarchy's confusion and disproportionate obsession with sex, where it has little space in scripture or the gospels, with Christ seemingly unbothered about sex in a way that the C of E does.

Greg continues:

"That's not to say that the way we humans relate to each other of which sex is a part isn't the business of the Church, of course it is and the Church should have something to say. It just seems to have focused on the wrong things to say about it! If the Church was talking about faithfulness and commitment or if it was talking

about integrity or those sorts of things, I think we'd all be a lot happier and the fact that it gets so hot under the collar as to who and who isn't married or what gender people are and all that sort of stuff. It just seems the most massive misdirection and where does that come from?"

He goes on to wonder aloud whether the hierarchy is insecure when it comes to talking about their own sex and faith life in an open way, along with the intricate relationship between these two aspects because it is fearful of difference. In addition, Greg wonders about sexual anxiety and repression as another indicator, to make sense of The House of Bishops' repeated preoccupation with non-heterosexual sex.

"Certainly, amongst gay men, it is commonly held to be the case that the most virulent homophobic men are men who themselves either have a desire or a fantasy about sex with another man, or are deeply troubled and disturbed by that. So, the behaviour is a real pushing away or lashing out at that."

Greg also considers the power of judgementalism and how this intersects and comingles with sexual anxiety and repression, regardless of whether one is attracted to, and/or sexually active with, same-sex or opposite-sex partners or both.

"I'm thinking a lot about judgementalism at the moment and the instinct that there is within us to castigate others for the things we don't like within ourselves, and of course Jesus had a lot to say about that. So, whilst that doesn't really seem to have diminished Christians' energy for being judgemental towards others, you can at least quote Christ and say "Plank, speck. Speck, plank". What's going on here? Somehow it feels like people think they have really got free reign there: 'So I really will have a go at other people who are different from me or those people who don't conform to the norm'; and somehow the Church gives me permission to do that'."

Before commenting on the C of E hierarchy, Gregory recounts his painful journey as an Evangelical married priest, coming out as gay, getting divorced and then being 'sent' to therapy to 'straighten him out' by the then presiding Bishop, only to be told that his license to officiate as a parish priest had been withdrawn. He describes this, in Christian existentialism terms, as his personal crucifixion. He contrasts this, some

years later, with a new presiding Bishop asking to speak with him, and reinstating him as a clergyman as his personal resurrection. Taking up residency in a new parish as the incumbent some months later was equivalent to a spiritual moment of transfiguration for this participant. Based on these profound experiences he announces that:

“I’ve always been critical of the Church, partly because I’ve seen over and over and over again, the damage that the Church, as an institution and guardian of spirituality, has caused so much pain and humiliation; and the inauthenticity that the Church has inflicted upon this society and the world at large.”

4.4.2 Summary

The House of Bishops continued inability or reluctance regarding the re-unification of sexual and spiritual ecstasy was a cause of profound concern, deep psychological hurt and incisive political comment. The final open-ended question revealed how a seismic gap exists between the hierarchy’s official instruction on matters of sexuality and spirituality, and what is being phenomenologically experienced and taught at grass roots level by these heterosexual and LGBT clergy. In the meantime, both psychological hurt and spiritual harm have been experienced by many of the participants and despite the C of E prizing of sex within heterosexual marriage as the gold standard for Christians to attain, the reality on the ground is far more complex, rich and inclusive. Such is the defiance of these heterosexual and LGBT C of E clergy and a testament to their unshakeable faith, and for the twelve of these respondents who have felt blessed and graced by God through sexual ecstasy.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will now discuss the results that have emerged as a consequence of undertaking several levels of analysis by integrating Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology, which was addressed in Chapter 3. In addition, the superordinate themes and subthemes that have constellated will now be juxtaposed with the recursive literature review (Ridley, 2012) presented in Chapter 2. In this way, I aim to interface psychological, theological and phenomenological perspectives to enliven the discussion regarding the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E. Consequently, perspectives provided by the recursive literature review may be pertinent to re-emphasise at this point, along with incorporating new insights gleaned from further publications and research to provide additional depth and texture to this discussion. Towards the end of this discussion, before concluding, it will also be expedient to critically evaluate both the implications and limitations of this study; and signpost suggestions for further potential research regarding the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and non-heterosexual clergy.

Four essential questions were the driving force behind this research study exploring the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy of the C of E. These are as follows:

1. What is the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy for heterosexual and LGBT clergy?
2. Are sexual and spiritual ecstasy experienced in a diametrically opposed relationship or a unified one?

3. If the sacred is encountered through sexual ecstasy, is this through particular sexual practices employed by participants or are these moments 'given'?
4. How do such moments inform and shape participants' spiritual growth and psychological development?

Through the integration of Transpersonal Awareness with IPA four superordinate themes gradually constellated as clusters of relationship began to emerge within the data analysis, which I now discuss in turn.

5.1 The Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy

Here, I address those participants who volunteered a dialectical predisposition as to how they organised and managed their sex and faith lives, and qualitatively distil the descriptors that they employed to articulate this frame of reference. This is sharply contrasted with those two participants who framed their sexual and spiritual inclinations in dualistic terms.

5.1.1 The Dialectical Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy

Twenty participants from across the heterosexual and LGBT spectrum reported a 'both-and' frame of reference when considering their own relationship between their sexuality and spirituality. In other words, respondents both psychologically and theologically maintained that these two aspects of their being were held in unified terms; and, importantly, they did not report any mental dissonance or anguish as a result of this combined understanding. There were a number of ways in which participants qualitatively defined how these sexual and religious impulses (TePaske, 2008) overlapped and interacted. For example, sexual and spiritual ecstasy involved being physically or soulfully penetrated by a significant human other or Divine agent.

Both processes could be either gentle or orgasmic in nature (Otto, 1958), leading to layers of the self being peeled away to reveal a more authentic way of being and responding. These experiences collectively reveal the authentic self as sex and spirit, relativizing the trivialities of the day or dissolving the various personas that have accrued over time, thereby obscuring contact with their sexual and spiritual essence. Many of the respondents were suspicious about the Cartesian-dualism that abounded within Christian theology and discourse, and for some, including the Christian mystics. As a result, they were subsequently committed to embracing an immanent (Washburn, 1988; 1994; 2003) and relational-participatory (Ferrer, 2011) approach to their sexual and spiritual ecstasy to overcome this. Two heterosexual female participants both recalled moving memories of holding their small child on their chest while they rested or slept. This phenomenological response suggests that Jung's (1911-12/1952) all-encompassing definition of libido to include "power, hunger, hatred, sexuality or religion" (ibid, para. 197) has important validation here, rather than being narrowly defined as sex, *per se*.

5.1.2 The Dualistic Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy

Two participants reported that their sexual and spiritual ecstasy were separate commodities, which existed in parallel terms. Both respondents, a gay male and heterosexual female, cited different reasons for this: the male participant attributed this to the monastic overtones of his spirituality and his *via negativa* approach to his spiritual life as he grappled with the existence of God, through discerning what God is not. This predisposition and world-view would possibly preclude the probability of experiencing mystical union with God through the veil of sexual ecstasy. For the female participant, sex and spirit were reported as discrete categories of human existence.

However, it is fascinating to note that she used similar descriptors to expound her experiences of sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Clearly, for these two participants, Freud's (1910/1957) words corroborated their experience when he boldly claimed that "[S]o much of the divine and sacred was ultimately extracted from sexuality" (p.97).

5.2 Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy and the Aftereffects

In this subsection, I discuss the direct experiences of mystical union through sexual ecstasy that the twelve participants reported and described. It will be advantageous to describe how the twin archetypal energies of Eros (sexual libido or impulse) and the Self (religious libido or impulse) were phenomenologically embodied; and highlight how these heightened experiences shaped and influenced each respondent's sex and faith journey (Jung, 1911-12/1952; TePaske, 2008). Immediately after this point, it will be important to consider the implications of a small number of participants who experienced transitory moments of sexual ecstasy during spiritual experiences. As an important subtheme and counterpoint to the above, I will go on to discuss the barriers that have prevented the remaining eight participants from experiencing transcendent sex (Wade, 2004), along with the shadow side that sexuality also holds.

5.2.1 The Presence and Impact of Transcendent Sex

Passionate states of joy and pain, or power and vulnerability, were highlighted by a significant number of participants who encountered God through the veil of sexual ecstasy with their life partner or through consensual sex. Pain and passion were interwoven with sexual and spiritual ecstasy, which provided a much-needed consilience between these conflicted phenomenological states (Lancaster, 2011). What immediately comes to mind here is the exquisite moans of joy and pain professed

by St. Theresa of Avila. The respondents, barring one, either directly resonated with St. Theresa's experience of the Divine through erotic love-making or at least identified with the process she was describing, even if the imagery she employed did not immediately resonate. There was a sense of self-transcendence and an ineffability through this process, while simultaneously having a deeper connection with oneself and their partner. This expansive and inclusive sense of self was reported by several respondents, which is aptly expressed through the terms *Unio Mystica* or the Third (Haule, 2010); wherein the sacred touches the space between the lover and the beloved during ecstatic sex.

Other features that accompanied participants' experiences of mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy included, the dissolution and transcendence of spatial boundaries relating to time and space. As a result, respondents expressed a sense of peace and love both during gentle sexual intimacy and through orgasmic love-making, leaving them with a deep sense of oneness and gratitude. I am reminded here of Agosin who holds sexual and spiritual desire in a healthy, dialectical relationship, noting that as human beings:

We long for the union with the sexual other so that we may become whole, the same way that we long for divine union to find meaning and purpose in our lives. In a similar light, we can see that in orgasm that we are swept away in the same way that the ego is taken over by the Self in mystical union. (1992, p.46)

These processes were deeply affirming for each of these participants that reconfirmed their sense of self as sex and spirit. Two gay priests, in particular, verified that as a result of searching for consensual promiscuous sex with a stranger, their faith had been realigned and recalibrated as they encountered God through ecstatic homoerotic

intercourse. In a noticeable sense, they reported that their sexual encounter with another man recalibrated their incarnational faith, breathing new life into the Christian faith they confessed in a visceral and embodied way. Samuels (2009) reflects on these numinous (Otto, 1958) feelings of awe, wonder and trembling that can clearly be animated when someone engages in promiscuous sex. Such heightened and intense encounters can reveal the primitive and chthonic face of God, which can be both affirming and transformative. On this point, I perceive a profound link with Bourgeault's (2010) passionate theological explanation about the Christian faith: "The core icon of the Christian faith, the watershed moment from which it all emerges, is not enstatic but *ecstatic* – love completely poured out, expended, squandered" (p.96 – italics in original).

Of further merit is Martin's (2006) exploration of gay men's non-rational and therefore, chthonic sexual encounters with other men, that lead to transcendent experiences of the divine. He reviews and explores the mystical margins of the World's Religions such as Sufism (Islam), the Christian mystics (Christianity), Kabbalah (Judaism) and other various forms of Tantric sex (Buddhism and Hinduism). Consequently, he maintains that while formalised religions tend to cast carnal sexuality as the antithesis of spirituality, many people, at different times and from various religious frames of reference, have indeed encountered God through sexual ecstasy. These experiences involved a:

[S]ense of merger with another person, which may be most common, to the encounter or merger with ultimate cosmic consciousness, [while] some people might suddenly lose the sense of individual selfhood and feel an intense connectedness with groups of people, all people, or all living things. (p.217)

This is no less so for gay male priests who are searching for that sense of sameness and unity, both physically and spiritually, with a male lover. Such encounters can psychologically, theologically and viscerally confirm a gay man's deep need to feel a sense of belonging. During the process of promiscuous sex, a gay man can also feel affirmed as both intrinsically good and Godly. According to Martin, this deep need was ultimately denied to the individual gay man who was growing-up as a child, adolescent or young man in an invariably heterosexual family environment. In this sense, encountering the 'Promiscuous Face of God' is both psychologically and spiritually restorative, which is in keeping with those two gay priests who corroborated these experiences in their own sex and faith lives.

Collectively, all of the participants reported an unfathomable sense of being blessed and graced by the presence of God through the veil of sexual ecstasy. What can be deduced from this is that the mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy reported by these twelve participants was not the result of sexual technique, but rather as a consequence of grace. In *The New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, grace is not "conceived as a thing: it is the transformation (...) of human life. Therefore, grace is a gift of God distinct from his gift of human life. It consists of God giving himself to men (sic), so that they can know him and love him" (1983, p.245).

In addition to this important point, none of these twelve participants linked their experiences of *Unio Mystica* through ecstatic sex to their spiritual practises or their attainment of higher levels of spiritual growth or development. This seems to imply that these experiences were mediated through an integration between the 'downward-

spiral' or immanent pathway (Washburn, 1988; 1994; 2003) and the 'participatory' or relational emphasis advocated by Ferrer (2011). This would seem to intimate that these participants' moments of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) were not connected with the 'upward-ladder' approach embedded within the perennial philosophy (Wilber, 2000). However, these twelve participants are nonetheless steeped in this transcendent tradition of encountering God, and this may well have played a dynamic part to encountering the sacred through the portal of sexual ecstasy with regard to their perceptiveness and receptiveness to such experiences.

Many respondents, with the exception of one participant, reported that one of the aftereffects of transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) involved a sense of oneness with all living things. This resulted in an increased confidence and openness, not only towards their loved ones and friends, but to the parishioners they served. These feelings enhanced their psychological and emotional availability as they sensed a deeper authentic bond with God, themselves and others. In turn they actively channelled their experiences into their ministry that galvanised their theological calling and purpose and strengthened their efficacy as a parish priest. These results are in line with Wade's (2004) extensive research and Martin's (2006) observations discussed earlier.

It is essential to note that of the twelve participants who described their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in unitary terms, and who have consequently reflected upon their experiences of the mystical presence of God through sexual ecstasy, are mostly men. That is, three heterosexual men, six gay men and one latent-bisexual man. This leaves one lesbian and one transgendered participant. Taken as a whole, nine of the twelve

identify as non-heterosexual. It is further important to note that these non-heterosexual participants powerfully testify to their sense of communing with God through the raptures of sexual union. I recognise important links here, with Freud's (1930/1961) notion of 'oceanic feelings'. He unsurprisingly envisaged oceanic feelings as pathological and linked this energetic experience to religion. However, he did concede that this oceanic feeling could positively occur in the context of a loving relationship, signalling that the "boundary between the ego and object (...) melt[s] away" (p.13). We find a similar understanding with Maslow's (1964) phrase 'peak-experiences'. When peak-experiences emerge, it heralds the dissolution of "splitting, conflicts and oppositions" (p.66). In turn, the immediate experiential field is replaced and imbued with a sense of unity and oneness. It would seem that oceanic oneness and peak-experiences underscore how a heightened experience of love and the sacred can coalesce and be both affirming and transformative for these non-heterosexual clergy.

In sharp contrast, we will recall, The House of Bishops have deemed that non-heterosexual lifestyles fall short of the Christian ideal:

The convergence of scripture, Tradition and reasoned reflection on experience, even including the newly sympathetic and perceptive thinking of our own day, makes it impossible for the Church to come with integrity to any other conclusion. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry. (1991, pp.19-20)

The House of Bishops officially stipulates that non-heterosexual clergy should refrain from consummating their same-sex desire, and live a life of sexual restraint and celibacy. In effect, those clergy who identify as such have never been publicly encouraged in actively expressing their sexual desire as a God-given gift of personal

grace and priestly affirmation. It is poignant to note that what the C of E continues to withhold from its non-heterosexual clergy is the very blessing and confirmation that they receive as a result of those moments of mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy. Seemingly, the grace of God is not duty bound to the proclamations uttered by the C of E hierarchy on matters of sexual and spiritual ecstasy, particularly as these relate to non-heterosexual clergy.

5.2.2 Experiencing Sexual Ecstasy in a Sacred Space

In Chapter 2 it was noted that while sexual and spiritual ecstasy were commonly regarded as psychically opposed, Jung understood physical and spiritual passions in a unified way. Furthermore, he maintained that these twin archetypal energies are a rich resource to ignite and inform an individual's individuation process of growth and development. As we have seen this has been notably verified by twelve of the participants who took part in this research. However, he also contested that "it often needs the merest touch to convert one into the other" (1948/1960, para. 414). Only three of the twelve participants relayed that they had indeed experienced sexual ecstasy in a sacred space or as a result of spiritual ecstasy during a religious act of worship. This would seem to imply that Jung's assertion that these psychic energies can convert into each other, at the merest touch, is somewhat overstated for this group of research participants. However, many of the respondents reported that they were so focused on their priestly role, in terms of presiding at the Eucharist, delivering their sermon and assuring that the act of worship ran smoothly for their congregation, that often their most profound moments of spiritual ecstasy did not take place during such occasions. Of the three who did describe such moments, however fleetingly, it is thought-provoking to note that these were all male participants: two heterosexual

priests and one latent-bisexual priest. Pointedly, all three respondents related these experiences to erotic images of oral sex as they administered the sacrament of Holy Communion to a worshiper who knelt in front of them at the altar rail.

5.2.3 Barriers to Experiencing Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy

Of the eight participants who did not experience *Unio Mystica* through ecstatic sex, one bisexual priest and one gay priest, made direct links to their sexual boundaries being transgressed by an older man, when they were both teenagers. This left them with complex and conflicted feelings about the distinctive relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Consequently, their individuation journey has involved them in the delicate task of tenderly managing their sexual impulse with courage and faith. These personal qualities were visibly present as each respondent spoke about the relationship between their sex and faith lives. When their sexual integrity became compromised as a result of these events, both participants clearly discovered solace, nurturance and strength from their religious impulse. It is worthy of note that both parties recognised that the ability to surrender to sexual ecstasy would be a vital preamble to being blessed and graced by God in this way; something they had both felt unable to do due to the power of the past in the present moment.

Another respondent, while accepting that experiencing the Third (Haule, 2010) during sexual lovemaking with his male partner could indeed one day be a possibility, appeared to envisage sexual ecstasy in the service of a higher spiritual calling. Here, Jung's insight that "[u]nder natural conditions a spiritual limitation is set upon the unlimited drive of the instinct to fulfil itself, which differentiates it and makes it available

for different applications” (Jung, 1955-6/1963, para. 602) seems accurate for this gay priest. A further participant recognised that the psychological and theological messages that he received while growing-up, about being gay, has taken him many years to leave behind. Moving away from his remote village, and discovering a place of refuge and unconditional love in the presence of God, is helping him to find greater resolve to try and live at the centre of his sexual and spiritual impulses with enormous courage as a gay priest.

Three heterosexual female participants (one who previously identified as a gay man prior to gender confirmation surgery) reported that they received implicit and explicit messages about their sexual impulse that were prohibitive, puritanical or protestant in nature. Reviewing the research outcomes on women’s experiences of transcendent sex Ogden noted that: “When women connect sex and spirit, they speak of a synergy of physical sensation with intangible experiences such as love, passion, compassion, altruism, empathy, reverence, and sometimes grace” (2008, p.108). However, as a marriage, family and sex therapist she was painfully aware that for the many women she had therapeutically worked with a large number who struggled to connect sex and spirit in their own lives and in their relationships. Subsequently, Ogden undertook a survey of 3,810 American participants. Of those who responded 82% were women. From the data that she gathered Ogden identified four cultural dynamics that blocked or prohibited women from uniting their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Namely, “selective education, religious belief system, norms about pleasure, and mind-body separation” (p.108). These dynamics may have some bearing as to why these three heterosexual female priests continue to wrestle with reconciling their sexual and religious impulses in more integrating and gratifying ways.

5.2.4 The Shadow Side of Eros

TePaske, rightly notes the sacred or numinous nature (involving luminosity and darkness) of Eros, when he asserts: "The proposition that every conceivable variation of human sexual behaviour, from its most life-enhancing to its most destructive, carries concealed within it a powerful religious impulse is at once a provocation, an evocation and invocation" (2008, p.3). On this note, one heterosexual male participant was so concerned with the dangers that sex and sexuality potentially hold, that the luminous side of the numinous (Otto, 1958) became, for the most part, concealed. Freud's (1932/1964) position that Eros needs to be principally self-controlled and restrained clearly had enormous personal self-reference for this participant; whereby his encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in his own life, had eclipsed the bliss of divine light that sexual ecstasy might allow. However, he was also making an important point, which four other participants equally made, but with a different emphasis and nuance that I now address.

One heterosexual female participant, for example, asserted that once sex becomes disconnected from intimacy and love, it runs the risk of becoming an addictive end goal, resulting in exploitation and/or self-loathing. She incisively denounced the C of E for failing to broadcast a positive and compelling account of the role of sex and sexuality with regard to human development and spiritual growth. A bisexual female priest was particularly critical on this front, arguing that by the Church unwittingly divorcing sex from spirit it makes Eros all the more a compelling commodity to be pursued and gained as a self-serving end in itself. Two gay priests were also aware of the shadow side of Eros. They, likewise, would like to see the C of E proactively endorsing sexuality as a key companion to spirituality: as something to be explored

and experimented with in one's early adult years to support the human trajectory of psychological development and spiritual growth; rather than sex and sexuality being solely relegated to Christian marriage and procreation.

Without question, Eros harbours a darkness that can be readily disavowed and if this darkness is ignored it can lead to destructive and soul-destroying sexual encounters for oneself or it can be used as a powerful force to demonize those individuals or groups who are 'different' with devastating consequences. Moore (1990/2005) has broached the shadow side of Eros to explore the personal and collective ramifications when the sexual impulse is deemed to be utterly dangerous and subsequently denied. He studied and reflected upon the fictitious figures of the Marquis de Sade – in particular, *Justine and Juliet*. Justine is a charming and innocent girl who is ravished, raped, tortured and degraded. Guggenbühl-Craig notes in the Foreword, that this story "symbolically represents the necessary ravishing of the innocent pure part of our soul [and that] innocence is, in the final analysis, a refusal to come really in touch with this world" (ibid, p. ix). Given the recursive literature review that has appeared throughout this thesis, one might speculate that for Christianity sex has been perceived as a contaminant that must be kept from the innocent pure part of the soul.

Moore's contention is that we contribute and maintain a world of darkness by not acknowledging our own sexual desires. As a result, we project these outwards either through our personal unconscious or through the collective unconscious. Subsequently, those who are seemingly 'other' will often be the recipients of these projections leading to scapegoating, discrimination and abuse. Furthermore, in the

Marquis de Sade, Moore perceives an exemplary ambassador of the urgent need to imaginatively find an outlet for our dark erotic impulses through reflection and fantasy. In this way, dark Eros is taken out of personality, and emotion, and action, and consciously refined through the active imagination of our fantasies. If this could be actively embraced in the life of the Church, perhaps LGBT clergy and laity would become less of a target to carry the disagreeable and therefore unwanted sexual desires held by the hierarchy, including the House of Bishops.

5.3 The Heterosexual, Gay and Lesbian *Coniunctio*

TePaske offers an uncompromising critique of the blatant refusal of organised patriarchal religions "to provide adequate images, symbols, mythologies, or rituals through which the full range of sexual instincts might be accepted, positively valued, reflected upon, and imaginatively cultivated" (2008, p.3). Consequently, in his practice he uses Jungian psychology and mythology to explore and reaffirm the numinous quality of both sexuality *and* spirituality. This has not been undertaken as an abstract exercise but has been grounded in his therapeutic experiences of working with victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse as a clinical psychologist and Jungian analyst. In addition, he draws upon his insights and understandings as a religious historian.

In part, TePaske's critique was one of my inspirations to utilise the erotic poetry from the Christian mystics and employ heterosexual, lesbian and gay conjunctions to provide literary texts, images and symbols for participants to interact with "the *temenos*, the sacred space between the inner psychological reality and outer material reality" (Johnson, 2010, p.167 – italics in original). This third space acted as an

important transitional space whereby participants could wrestle with these materials. What transpired as a result of the heterosexual *coniunctio* was that some participants felt too much shame was being implied by the Holy Spirit (dove) being placed over the couple's genitalia that simultaneously, and somewhat regrettably, justified the C of E's position regarding sex within heterosexual marriage as *the* template for Christian living. Some heterosexual respondents felt confirmed by the image, while others felt that greater psychological homeostasis was needed between light and darkness in respect of sexual and spiritual ecstasy. One female participant understood the heterosexual conjunction in purely human terms. A male participant sensed that the picture was over-spiritualising the sexual impulse. Finally, for one participant the picture was indicative of the patriarchal bias inherent in the Church's theologising and teaching about Christian marriage and sexual and spiritual ecstasy.

Another key factor for providing a lesbian and gay *coniunctio* image, respectively, ensued from the controversial debate that took place between Carvalho (2003) and Denman (2003). Carvalho argued that a heterosexual *coniunctio* could psychologically articulate the message of personal transformation, regardless if one identified as heterosexual or non-heterosexual, because all life comes from this male-female dyad or source. On the other hand, Denman argued, such an argument may conceal a subtle homophobic undercurrent that still holds sway within Jungian circles. It is meaningful to note that one lesbian and one bisexual woman were deeply impacted by the lesbian *coniunctio*, feeling both affirmed and celebrated in the process. One remaining bisexual woman preferred this to the heterosexual depiction but was still uncomfortable by the sense of merger between the two figures, inferring an injunction against separateness. Three gay priests were visibly moved by the gay *coniunctio* and

this substantially had a confirmatory and transformative impact upon these respondents. This was also the case for the latent bisexual male priest. Other respondents grappled with the gay *coniunctio* with some wanting to add an accentuated sexual overtone to counteract an over-spiritualisation that was reminiscent of sublimating sexuality in spirituality.

Collectively, employing a heterosexual, lesbian and gay *coniunctio* (along with the erotic poetry from the Christian mystics) provided heterosexual and LGBT participants with visual and auditory material to commune and interact with their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Wagner has argued that such materials can elicit “[i]deals for judging beauty, fairness, power, religiosity, and other such matters” (ibid, 2011, p.72). Clearly, these images were impactful and for some respondents this met a deep need to be mirrored and praised in their own unique journey towards individuation, which is clearly lacking in the C of E’s approach to the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy; particularly as this relates to same-sex desire for LGBT clergy.

5.4 The House of Bishops and the C of E Hierarchy

What became ruefully apparent, from a majority of the participants, was the C of E’s inability to take a strong lead on the issue of sexual and spiritual ecstasy in an inclusive, positive, and affirming way. Some participants would like the hierarchy to exhibit more courage on this front. Many attributed this to the House of Bishops’ fear to teach, instruct and encourage the faithful on matters of sex and sexuality, and its blatant reluctance to underscore its important links with spirituality; how together, these twin impulses are essential to our nature and to our psychological growth and

spiritual development. Instead, the hierarchy has acted as an injurious agent with several participants denying, repressing or sublimating their sexual ecstasy. This has invariably resulted in psychological pain, humiliation and a deep sense of inner disjunction between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy, especially for non-heterosexual clergy. This sense of rejection was palpable and consistently attributed to the Church's antagonistic way in which sex and spirit continue to be configured by the House of Bishops, which has led to inauthenticity and duplicitous lifestyles. However, one participant strongly felt that the House of Bishops needs to be more proactive in emphasising the shadow and dangerous aspect of sexuality in what he singularly perceives as the consumerist age of sex.

5.5 Implications of this Research Study

This study provides an important contribution to the ongoing debate that continues to dominate the C of E regarding the distinctive relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, especially for non-heterosexual clergy. While the Church has prayed, discussed and consulted its members about the way in which Eros (sexual libido) and the Self (religious libido) interact (Jung, 1911-12/1952; TePaske, 2008), it has never been confronted with empirical evidence about this dynamic in the lives of its priests who have faithfully served the C of E. What is evident from this research study is that a majority of heterosexual and non-heterosexual clergy in this sample hold their sexual and spiritual ecstasy in a dialectical relationship. In particular, twelve respondents revealed a distinctive relationship between their sex and faith lives, reporting transformative moments of mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy. These experiences have shaped and enhanced their psychological growth and spiritual

development in profound and affirming ways. As such these experiences have graced and blessed these participants: enriching their intimate personal relationships and their day to day priestly connections with those they administer to as faithful clergy serving the C of E. What has also been revealed is the continued psychological and spiritual harm that the House of Bishops perpetuates by holding sexual and spiritual ecstasy in hostile terms.

As I speculate on the reception of these research findings, if published, I suspect that a number of responses will unfold from different quarters. For some Bishops within the C of E hierarchy they may conclude, once they consider the psychological, theological and phenomenological accounts that have been presented, that a far more radical vision is needed to address the current impasse on same-sex relationships for both clergy and laity. The challenge here would be to show strong leadership about the numinous nature of sex and sexuality, and how mystical union with God through sexual ecstasy may be a gift of grace and blessing, for some people, beyond sexual technique or spiritual advancement. There will no doubt be those Bishops who will dismiss these findings as the antithesis of the Christian Gospel. They may do so by interpreting the data presented here differently or citing alternative experiences or providing a counter-rationale, theological or otherwise, as to why non-heterosexual clergy serving the C of E in public ministry should maintain a stance of sexual abstinence and ascetic celibacy. Consequently, the notion of integrating and celebrating sexually active non-heterosexual clergy could be purveyed as a further sign of cultural decadence and scriptural disobedience. If this is indeed the dominant response then my hope is that LGBT C of E clergy (and indeed laity) may find comfort,

affirmation and hope from these participants' stories. That is, that what the C of E hierarchy continues to forbid for its non-heterosexual clergy (and laity), namely, celebrating their sexual desire as a gift from God to be actively used with their spiritual desire, is phenomenologically bestowed and manifested in the lives of some heterosexual and LGBT clergy as a God-given gift of grace and blessing.

5.6 Limitations of this Research

While there is significant evidence to suggest that male participants tend to be more prone to experiencing mystical union with God through ecstatic sex (a sizeable number of which identified as gay or bisexual), the reality is that in recruitment terms it was very difficult to enlist equal numbers of lesbian and bisexual female priests, and transgendered priests, to broaden, deepen and equalise the demographic variables in this regard. This recruitment imbalance relating to gender and sexual orientation may in effect be biasing the overall picture suggesting that the erotic avenue to encountering God as a gift of grace is predominantly privileged among male clergy. In the current climate of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia that exists within the Church hierarchy, I can imagine that for a number of people who were approached they feared exposure and that subsequently their privacy might be breached (despite the professional and ethical assurances stated otherwise), which perhaps prevented them from contributing to this timely and unique project. Another limitation of this research was the lack of a racially diverse sample, which was regrettable. A further limiting factor could also relate to my own gender, which could have had a restricting influence on female participants revealing their innermost experiences of their sexual and religious impulses that perhaps a female researcher might more readily elicit.

5.7 Future Suggestions for Further Research

Without question recruiting, recording and analysing twenty-two participants' lived experiences has been an arduous task (notwithstanding travelling the breadth and depth of England). However, to gather this rich descriptive data, which until now has been previously unobtainable and uncharted, also inspires me to suggest that additional research is needed to recruit larger groups of C of E clergy who identify as lesbian, bisexual female and transgendered. Such a venture would add further depth to this subject of enquiry and possibly substantiate or corroborate some of the results in this current research project. Some of the subthemes, for example, could be used as lines of enquiry for future research as this relates to heterosexual and LGBT clergy, such as 'The Barriers to Experiencing Transcendent Sex' or 'The Shadow Side of Sex', to add further texture to this new field of enquiry and debate.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

When I set out with this research project, my primary focus was to explore the personal, psychological and theological meanings that heterosexual and LGBT C of E clergy attributed to their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. My desire was to establish whether a distinctive and unified relationship existed between these two domains of embodied experience and existence. If this were proven to be so, I was curious to discover whether any of the participants had experienced a profound moment of *Unio Mystica*, the Third (Haule, 2010) or transcendent sex (Wade, 2004) through the veil of sexual ecstasy. Furthermore, if these moments had been experienced what were the repercussions of such an event and how did this contribute to each participant's psychological growth and spiritual development?

My earnest attempt, above all, was to present an empirical account of how non-heterosexual clergy actively exercise their sexual and spiritual ecstasy that both complements and enhances their sex and faith lives; and indeed, their priestly ministry and vocation. For a large number of participants, they extol and embody a sex-enhancing, spirit-enhancing and life-enhancing relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy; with twelve respondents in particular reporting that their profound experiences of God through the portal of sexual ecstasy has been both as a gift of grace and blessing.

Another reason for undertaking this research project that integrates Transpersonal Awareness with an IPA methodology, was to emulate and apply the four virtues that

the C of E aspires to assent to when dealing with matters of human sexuality: Bible, tradition, reason and experience. By bringing together psychological, theological and phenomenological perspectives, I have endeavoured to interface Bible, tradition, reason and experience to potentially excavate a different perspective on these matters. As I juxtapose the findings of this research with the C of E's enduring reluctance to see beyond heterosexual marriage as the highest form of expressing the Christian life, what transpires is the hierarchy's refusal to take an exemplary lead in providing an inclusive and holistic agenda on the issue of sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Clearly, the leadership continues to be disproportionately wedded to St. Paul the Apostle's unwitting anti-sexual legacy due to his anticipation about the imminent return of Christ with the Parousia. This anti-sexual legacy was given further doctrinal justification and authority through the anxious theologising of Augustine of Hippo who envisaged sex as intrinsically sinful, and ultimately cast this human aspect as a stumbling block to the spiritual life. These important Christian figures, products of their own personal, historical and cultural milieu, effectively separated sex and spirit putting them at enmity with one another. The reverberations of this animosity and antagonism are still felt today, especially by non-heterosexual clergy and laity.

These earnest and well-intentioned research objectives, which still remain at the heart of this project, were gradually joined by a profound mixture of surprise and delight, challenge and determination, and affirmation and resolve, as my research journey evolved. Surprise and delight that, in-keeping with the spirit of Anglicanism, the heterosexual and LGBT C of E clergy that I have been privileged to interview have shared complementary and diverse ways of organising and experiencing the

relationship between their sexual and spiritual ecstasy. Through the arduous challenge of recruiting twenty-two heterosexual and LGBT clergy from the C of E, I have a deeper awareness of my God-given doggedness never to give up even when the going gets tough, which I also sensed in my participants. And most significantly, based upon those participants who have shared their experiences of encountering the mystical presence of God through the veil of sexual ecstasy, a deeper sense of affirmation in my own distinct relationship between sexual and spiritual ecstasy; that translate into a greater resolve to utilise and harness my participants' profoundly moving stories to politically challenge the C of E to think afresh regarding its continued treatment of LGBT clergy who faithfully serve the Church.

This challenge is more than timely, given the C of E's continued insistence to confer unerring credence to the sexual abstinence and Christian celibacy espoused by the early Christian Church, especially for non-heterosexual clergy who identify as LGBT. Cumulatively, this stance contributes to the hierarchy's body-denying, sex-denying and world-denying tendencies that are not cognisant of or in keeping with the incarnational gospel that it proclaims: that God became a human being in the earthly figure of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the House of Bishops continues to configure the sexual and spiritual life forces in a dualistic and therefore a diametrically opposed relationship, rather than teaching about the dialectical and numinous nature that both the sexual and religious impulses intrinsically hold. Ultimately, this stance has caused untold psychological hurt and spiritual harm for LGBT clergy who have served or who continue to faithfully serve the C of E as parish priests.

6.1 Final Thoughts

Collectively, my participants' lived experiences and their unique stories are a challenge to the Church. As I consider this challenge, I am reminded of a former Archbishop, the iconic Church Leader and Nobel peace laureate, Desmond Tutu, who upon attending the Free and Equal Campaign in Cape Town in 2013 announced:

I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this ... I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say sorry, I mean I would much rather go to the other place ... I am passionate about this campaign as I ever was about apartheid. For me it is at the same level. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>)

I end this conclusion, with a deep sense of gratitude to the twenty-two participants who have generously contributed to this innovative project. Based on what these heterosexual and LGBT men and women have shared with me about their faith and sex lives, if Desmond Tutu's proclamation: "I could not worship a God who is homophobic" was a prayer, I would like to imagine that there would be twenty-three voices joining together with one accord shouting a resounding "Amen!"

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Appendix A:



LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

“Augustine, probably the most single influential voice on Christian thinking about sex, believed that God had condemned humanity to eternal damnation through Adam’s sexual act. Abstinence and asceticism became hallmarks of the early Christian era, casting a shadow on sexuality still felt today”
Jenny Wade

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to read this information about my research project that aims to explore: **“The relationship between spiritual and sexual experiences for Church of England Clergy: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis”** by Steven Smith. I am currently studying for an MPhil with the possible transfer to a Doctorate with The School of Natural Sciences and Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

The Rationale for this Study

As a parish priest, hospital chaplain and psychotherapist I have been interested in the relationship between spirituality and sexuality and how this might inform an individual’s identity, spiritual growth and personal development. Hence, you are being invited to take part in this research study because as a cleric within the C of E you may have had direct personal experiences and thoughts about these two aspects in respect of your own identity, and spiritual growth and personal development. Before you decide whether you would like to take part in this research project it is important to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it involves. Please, do take time to read the following information and consider my request. If something is not clear or you would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me on my e-mail address highlighted at the bottom of this Participant Information Sheet.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is an attempt to faithfully gather a current account of how C of E clergy experience their relationship between their preferred sexual orientation, and their unique relationship between their spirituality and sexuality. This is not a political or polemical research project. Rather my sincere attempt is to genuinely explore the relationship between spirituality and sexuality within the C of E clergy and to do so in a spirit of inclusivity and celebration.

2. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at

any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to a 1-hour semi-structured interview that includes open-ended questions, quotations and paintings. Once I have written-up the interview I will forward you a copy for you to check that you believe that this is a faithful account of the interview process. My research will last for up to 5 years and I will not ask for any further involvement apart from the 1-hour interview that I will conduct with you in your parish office.

4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?

There are no risks or hazards either directly built into the research and in the unlikely event you become uncomfortable then we can stop the interview process and recording at your request and talk this through with you. Indeed, I believe that the potential benefits involved offered via the interview process will support the participant to have a deeper understanding of their own unique relationship between their preferred sexual orientation and their spiritual and sexual life. Participants will also be contributing to a possible process of removing the shadow from sexuality in relation to spirituality in the spirit of inclusivity and celebrating difference.

5. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your name and address will be held in a locked filing cabinet, along with your taped interview. The interview will be transcribed, and this written record will either be given a pseudonym or code to protect your privacy and dignity. If I cite you in my written work for LJMU in terms of a quotation or in an article or other publications your anonymity will be protected with biographical information (such as Diocese, Parish, etc.) being edited out to avoid other clergy reading such a publication and second guessing who this might be.

6. Contact Details of Researcher

I can be contacted through my Liverpool John Moores University e-mail account which is:

Thank you for considering whether to take part in this study. Steven Smith.

Appendix B:



Demographic Questionnaire

In Strictest Confidence ...

If you would like to be considered to take part in this research project then please complete and send, along with the completed consent form in the s.a.e. provided to:

Or, you may wish to hand these over in person on the day of interview, once this has been agreed.

1) Name: *Please, print your name ...*

2) Gender: *Please, tick the appropriate box ...*

Male: ☐

Female: ☐

Transgendered Female to Male: ☐ Transgendered Male to Female: ☐

3) Age: *Please, tick the appropriate box ...*

21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71-80 ☐

4) Ethnicity: *Please, describe your ethnicity* _____

Please Turn Over

5) Sexuality: *Please, tick the appropriate box*

Heterosexual ☐ Bisexual ☐ Homosexual ☐ Other ☐

(N.B. If 'Other' please, specify) _____

6) Current Preferred Relationship or Lifestyle Choice: *Please, tick the appropriate box ...*

Opposite-Sex ☐ Same-Sex ☐ Both-Sex ☐ Celibate ☐

7) Churchmanship: *Please, describe your churchmanship ...*

8) Year of Ordinations: Deaconate? _____ Priesthood? _____

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Appendix C:



LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research:

“The relationship between spiritual and sexual experiences for Church of England Clergy: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis” ... by Steven Smith with The School of Natural Sciences and Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study in terms of a 1-hour open-ended interview at my convenience to take place within my parish office. ☐
5. I understand that the 1-hour individual interview will be audio recorded and I am happy to proceed. ☐
6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations and that any quotes will be totally anonymised. ☐

Name
Participant
ure

Date

of
Signat

Name
Researcher

Date

of
Signature

In Strictest Confidence ...

If you would like to be considered to take part in this research project then please complete and send, along with the demographic questionnaire form in the s.a.e. provided to:

Or, you may wish to hand these over in person on the day of interview, once this has been agreed.

Appendix D:

Transcription Conventions

*Taken from Flick, U. (2009, p.300) An Introduction to Qualitative Research (4th edition)
Thousand Oaks, CA; London: Sage, adapted from (Drew, 1995, p.78)*

Symbol:	Meaning:
[Overlapping speech
(0.2)	length of a pause in seconds
"Aw:::"	extended sounds; the stretches of sound are indicated by the number of colons according to the stretch length
<u>Word</u> spoken work	Underlining of a word indicates emphasis or stress of a spoken work
"fish-	hyphen indicates a broken word or sound
"hhhh" "hhhh" where the number of h's is equal to the length of the breath intake	an audible intake of breath transcribed as "hhhh" where the number of h's is equal to the length of the breath intake
WORD spoken	capitals indicate an increase in the amplitude of the word when spoken *****
(words...)	Brackets around uncertain transcript and indicates the transcriber's best guess

Appendix E: Transcript Example: Final Level of Analysis

'Glen' CB		
I: First, thing to say to you is thank you for this time.		
P1: That's alright.	The participant is happy to help.	
I: Because I know time is precious and this is a very pertinent topic at the moment that the Church needs to get a grip on and needs to be challenged about, a bit more.		
P2: <u>Absolutely!</u>	He feels this is an important topic and that the C of E needs to be challenged.	
I: The first question, can you describe what happens to you when you're having a spiritual experience?		
P3: (0.4) What happens to me physically?	He wonders whether I mean physically.	
I: Physically, emotionally, psychologically, and bodily.		
P4: I think a sense of enveloping love, erm, and sometimes a kind of a tingle down the spine that's akin to a particularly moving moment in a film or something, but I think a sense of God's presence::: and omniscience:::, for me. Erm, a peace, a sense of harmony in creation, a joy REALLY!	Tingling down the spine as a result of the enveloping love and presence of God engendering peace and harmony and joy.	(+) Spiritual Experiences: Peace, harmony & joy in Creation (CB Gay P4).
I: So, when you've had that real sense of tingling down the spine, being enveloped by God, and feeling that peace and that love, when you come out of that place, how does that effect you in how you see other people, see the world? Does it change anything?		

P5: I think it's such <u>a warm feeling</u> that you feel the desire to share it. Somehow your party to something that is a life enhancing thing and you want to share it with others, <u>because it's a good thing</u> , ultimately.	His warm feelings of encountering God compels him to share this because of its life enhancing impact.	(+) Spiritual Experiences – Impact: Life enhancing and a good thing (CB Gay P5).
P5a: I think <u>those moments bolster</u> one's faith because of course there are times when you don't feel like that and it's about holding onto some of those particularly special moments.	These moments bolster his faith and holding onto these special moments helps him through difficult times.	(+) Spiritual Experiences – Impact: Bolsters his faith (CB Gay P5a).
I: I'm just wondering about those feelings you've just described. Have you had those outside of a sacred space and if so, where would that be?		
P6: I don't think it has to be a sacred space, I think sometimes <u>it can be elsewhere with music, art, err, literature, you know, any kind of art form, I think.</u> (0.4) Yeah, (0.3) I don't think it's particularly tied to churches.	He can experience God in non-designated sacred spaces and through other avenues such as music, art and literature.	(+) Spiritual Experiences - encountering God outside of church: Music, art, literature (CB Gay P6).
I: No, so you can have those same feelings in other contexts?		
P7: <u>Yes, and with kind people,</u> [Mm] <u>people can, inspirational people can trigger</u> those feelings.	Kind and inspirational people can communicate the presence of God.	(+) Spiritual Experiences - encountering God through kind, inspirational people (CB Gay P7).

<p>I: I'm going to read you a piece from St John of the Cross:</p> <p><i>"On my flowery bosom, Kept whole for Him alone, There he reposed and slept; and I cherished Him, And the waving of the cedars fanned Him.</i></p> <p><i>As His hair floated in the breeze, that from the turret blew, He struck me on the neck, With his gentle hand, And all sensation left me.</i></p> <p><i>I continued in oblivion lost, My head was resting on my love; lost to all things and myself, and amid the lilies forgotten, threw All my cares away."</i></p> <p>What's your reaction to that piece?</p>		
<p>P8: (0.5) Well, <u>it's very erotic</u>, [Huh, huh] clearly; erm, can I read it again?</p>	<p>Understands St John of The Cross' mystical experience as erotic.</p>	<p>(+) St John of The Cross: Experiences as erotic (CB Gay P8).</p>
<p>I: Yea, please, do.</p>		
<p>P9: (0.8) I think <u>that's a more elaborate feeling</u> of my enveloping, I think that's a more <u>erotic</u> image:::</p>	<p>He understands St John of The Cross' experience as a more elaborate, erotic example of being enveloped by God.</p>	<p>(+) St John of The Cross: Elaborate expression of his enveloping experience of God (CB Gay P9).</p>

I: So, when you pick up on the erotic and the spiritual that you shared with me earlier, how does it speak or not?		
P10: I don't think it speaks to me particularly, erm, but I can see how it would for others.	St John of The Cross' experience does not directly resonate with his own experience.	(+) St John of The Cross: Doesn't speak directly to his experience (CB Gay P10).
P10a: It must depend on the form the erotic takes for an individual and for some people who are eroticising spiritual experience, because that's there only form of eroticism, then I would imagine that would be incredibly powerful, which sounds like, you know, what St John is saying. I don't think it entirely works for me.	Some people eroticise their spiritual experience because this is their only means to express their sexuality, and this can be powerful but does not work for the participant.	(-) St John of the Cross: Sublimating sexuality through spirituality (CB Gay P10a).
P10b: <u>But, God sleeping on his chest, I mean I think that's lovely and I think that speaks to me of the Incarnation, of the intimacy that God shares our form with us and walked with us, and for me, that sort of goes with the powerful image of John 1: "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us". That pitching the tent among us and that image of God lying on our chest that work's quite well for me.</u>	God sleeping on St John of The Cross' chest works for him and reminds him of God's intimacy with humanity through Jesus' incarnation.	(+) St John of The Cross: God sleeping on St John's chest speaks to him of incarnation (CB Gay P10b).
I: You were smiling as you said that.		
P11: I like that: <u>THAT's BEAUTIFUL, I've never heard this before!</u>	He appears touched by the beauty of imagining God lying on his chest.	(+) St John of The Cross: Touched by the image (CB Gay P11).
I: Right! So intensely erotic and intensely spiritual.		

P12: <u>It is</u> , of course they are!	Emphatic that St John's experience is erotic and spiritual.	(+) Sexuality & spirituality are interconnected (CB Gay P21).
I: What do you mean, of course they are?		
P13: Well, I think that's our history of our spirituality. St Theresa of Avila would be a bigger example of that but I'm not an expert on her writing or St John's. <u>For me</u> , I always had it in my head that St John is more dark night of the soul stuff, but I hadn't realised that there's more to his writing.	He believes that our spiritual heritage is both erotic and spiritual.	(+) Sexuality and spirituality are interconnected: Part of Christian History (CB Gay P13).
I: With the Christian Mystics, there's this dark night or negation, and then they work through this process and come out into the light. It's almost post-coital after the wilderness of the darkness.		
P14: Mm.		
I: When you're in the throes of sexual experience with another man, can you share, what's your experience like when you're in that heightened sexual union with another man? What's that like for you?		
P15: Well: <u>I think, I think</u> it's a deeply spiritual moment because it is the sense of the basest part of our humanity, <u>and I don't mean that in a negative way</u> , but I think it's without all the crap of our psychology to a certain extent.	When having a sex with another man, the basest part of his humanity connects with his spiritually beyond the everyday messiness of his psychological concerns or worries.	(+) Spiritual ecstasy through gay sexual ecstasy: Sex as a conduit to the spiritual (CB Gay P15).

<p>P15a: It's very sort of raw:::, simple:::, primal:::, encounter:::, and since we hold very strongly that we're created in God's image <u>and function as we do with God as the Creator of all that we are</u>, then there is a sense in which <u>that moment aligns us in some way with the faith that we hold</u>.</p>	<p>This raw, simple, primal encounter aligns him with God as his Creator and (re)aligns him with his Christian faith.</p>	<p>(+) Raw sexual encounter with another man: Connects him to God as Creator and aligns him with his faith (CB Gay P15a).</p>
<p>P15b: <u>AND, for me I have always been quite deeply influenced by the idea of The Trinity being about the embrace of the other and that the whole surrender to the other</u>. To a certain extent, depending on the specific logistics of any kind of sexual encounter <u>that can be felt and experienced for human beings, both ways</u>. So, I always found, without it being a threesome or whatever, there is something quite Trinitarian about it, <u>a deep, sort of intimate union</u>.</p>	<p>The theological notion of The Trinity embracing and surrendering to each other can be reciprocally experienced when having sex with another man.</p>	<p>(+) The embrace, surrender and sexual union with another man: Deep, intimate, Trinitarian union (CB Gay P15b).</p>
<p>I: When you say that, the word comes into my head, when you're in the throes of the sexual, heightened experience, I can imagine it being a deeply spiritual penetration. Or maybe, I'm putting words into your mouth.</p>		
<p>P16: I think often, <u>I think</u> – I'm not sure what you want me to say <u>[I want you to say what you need to say]</u> – <u>I think we can project some lovely ideas into the sexual act and to a certain extent I can understand some of those feelings, but I think the reality often is, none of these things go through one's head [No, no] at the time</u>.</p>	<p>He can understand some of the theological ideas that he projects into the gay sexual act but during the actual act it is a much more visceral and pre-cognitive experience.</p>	<p>(+) Connecting with God through sexual encounter with another man: At the time visceral and pre-cognitive (CB Gay P16).</p>
<p>I: So, when you're in the throes of sexual experience how does it change you?</p>		

P17: Well it taps into a deep, to two things: <u>a deep vulnerability and a deep powerfulness:::</u> , really, to a greater or lesser extent. I mean that's the essence of the human condition, to be vulnerable and to be powerful.	During sex with another man he connects with his human essence, feeling both vulnerable and powerful.	(+) Raw sexual encounter with another man – impact: vulnerability and powerfulness (CB Gay P17).
I: <u>At the same time?</u>		
P18: At the same time, at different times, erm, yeah.	He can feel vulnerable and powerful at the same time or separately.	
I: So, when you come out of that powerful and vulnerable experience does it change you in anyway afterwards? How do you see other people in the world?		
P19: There is an ecstasy in it, I think. I mean it's very affirming, if it's a good experience, it can be very affirming.	When sex with another man is a good experience it can be both ecstatic and affirmative.	(+) Raw sexual encounter with another man – impact: Affirming (CB Gay P19).
P19a: If it is a bad experience it can be terribly devastating and cause all kinds of insecurity and vulnerability.	When sex is bad it can be devastating inducing insecurity and vulnerability.	(-) Sexual encounter with another man – impact: Devastating (CB Gay P19a).
P19b: I mean I think there is an enormous difference between sex as result of a sort of, a sort of hunt and sex as a part of a monogamous, long term relationship. I think there about different things. I think desire plays a role differently in both cases, you know, <u>in the sense that desire in a hunt can be quite akin to the search for God.</u>	Hunting for a casual male lover has striking parallels with his search for God. Desire plays a different role in monogamous same-sex relationships.	(+) Hunting for sex with another man: Akin to searching for God – different within a monogamous relationship (CB Gay P19b).

P19c: <u>That absolute yearning:::: [Mm] for someone, falls very much when you're in those dark moments when you think your faith is a load of old bullshit but you're desperate for a sign:::: of some affirmation.</u>	When this absolute yearning for a casual sexual lover is consummated, particularly when his faith holds no credibility, this experience can be a sign of affirmation about his faith and about God.	(+) Hunting for sex with another man - impact: Sign of affirmation when his faith is futile (CB Gay P19b).
P19d: I would like to be able to say that's the same in a (monogamous) relationship but I don't think it is, really, in quite the same way. I think that lends itself to other spiritual ideas, but that sort of raw, obsessive -	Monogamous relationships lend themselves to different spiritual motifs.	
I: Hunt?		
P20: Hunting, yearning.	Hunting and yearning for casual sex.	
I: For the other?		
P21: For another, <u>the</u> Other.	Hunting and yearning for the human other and the Divine Other.	
I: Is that where you're vulnerable and being powerful fit in, if it's been a good experience?		
P22: Yeah, <u>I can't think of anything else in all our interactions that would arouse the intensity of feelings in that experience.</u>	Sex can be intensely unique in providing the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness, simultaneously.	(+) Hunting for sex with another man and yearning for God: Arouse intense feelings like no other (CB Gay P22).
I: I find that, what you've just shared with me incredibly powerful and very moving.		

P23: I've never particularly thought about it before.	Has not thought about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in this way before.	
I: Yeah, I know.		
P24: We don't, do we?	He acknowledges that we do not consider the relationship between sexuality and spirituality enough.	
I: No, we don't.		
P25: Which is why, <u>it's important that you're doing what you're doing.</u>	He feels that my current research is important to consider the relationship between sexuality and spirituality.	
I: A strange question.		
P26: Go on.	He's curious about my strange question.	
I: Have you ever had those kinds of intense sexual feelings when you're in a Church service, when you're praying or taking the Eucharist?		
P27: About what's going on or being distracted by those thoughts, quite independently?	He wonders if I mean that he might have been distracted by sexual thoughts.	
I: Well you might be distracted but I don't want to put words into your mouth. Have you ever had a real rapturous sense of the Divine and suddenly the erotic come up during a service		

P28: No.	Has never encountered sexual and spiritual feelings side by side during a church service.	(-) Sexuality and spirituality: Never experienced the erotic during a liturgical service (CB Gay P28).
I: Never.		
P29: No. <u>I wish it would!</u>	He wishes he could!	He wishes he could experience the erotic during a liturgical service (CB Gay P29).
I: (Laughs) Why do you wish it would?		
P30: I think because <u>my faith is quite intellectualised, erm, and you know St John's image and others, his mystical ecstasy is akin to a sexual feeling, and I think that must be incredible.</u>	He believes his faith can be intellectualised. Therefore, experiencing the erotic during a spiritual meditative state, like St John of The Cross, would be incredible.	(+) St John of The Cross: His faith is intellectualized and wishes he could have an experience like St John during the moment (CB Gay P30).
I: So, you would like that?		
P31: I'd love that!	He would love such an encounter.	
I: You would? So, going back to the hunt and it's been a good experience maybe that's your way to access, well not just embracing another...		
P32: Yes! Yes!	He agrees with perhaps where I am going in my reflections.	
I: But to...		
P33: Yes.	He is in agreement.	

I: To access the Divine Other.		
P34: Yes. Yes.	He is in agreement.	
I: That's what I'm wondering, to if you like, de-intellectualise?		
P35: <u>Yes! Yes! Yes!</u>	He emphatically agrees that going on the hunt for sex with another man might be his way of having an embodied experience of God as a complement to his intellectualised faith.	(+) Hunting for sex with another man - Akin to searching for God: His way of having an embodied experience of God to complement his intellectual faith (CB Gay P35).
I: And maybe get into your body, I wonder?		
P36: Yes, but that raises all kinds of ethical questions doesn't it which prevent us, prevent me from doing that.	However, this raises ethical questions from Christian Ethics that prevent him from searching and finding the Divine Other through a one-off sexual encounter with another man.	(-) C of E - Gay sexuality – Ungodly: Prevent him from exercising this pathway to God (CB Gay P36).
I: Can you say a bit more about that, when you say ethics?		
P37: Say more about that?	Reiterates what is being asked of him.	
I: <u>Yes.</u>		

P38: I think the constraints of ministry, Christianity and the Church, as they are at the moment, I mean if I were to say that for me, sort of: “My rawest feelings about desire for God and for the other, are invoked when I’m on the hunt for a shag”, then I, then I, I think that would be frowned upon by the majority of the Church.	His ministry, Christianity and the C of E would disapprove of him claiming that his rawest desire for God and another man are invoked when having a consensual one-off sexual encounter.	(-) C of E - Gay sexuality and one-off encounters with another man as a route to God – Ungodly: Frowned upon by the Church (CB Gay P38).
I: Yes, but what do you feel and think, let’s forget the Church for a moment.		
P39: I think <u>we’re really repressing ourselves very clearly and I think that’s dangerous. All sorts of repression are dangerous.</u>	He personally feels he is repressing his sexual and spiritual desire which is dangerous, by complying with the demands of being a priest, Christianity and the C of E’s current position.	(-) C of E - Gay sex and one-off encounters with another man – Ungodly: Repression (CB Gay P39).
I: Yeah, and the pressure we feel as clergy, some of us who don’t conform to a particular template, puts huge psychological pressure on us [It does. It does] or even distress or guilt or inner conflicts.		
P40: Very interesting. (0.5) I can only speak personally and I will, I mean my sexual expression is in a faithful, long term (same-sex) relationship <u>which I think in terms of the Church ticks most of the boxes for the constituents of the Church that who are going to embrace those kinds of things.</u>	His current, long term, faithful same-sex relationship would meet with approval for many constituent members of the Church of England.	(+) C of E - Gay Monogamous Relationship: For some worshippers, ticks the box of acceptability (CB Gay P40).

P40a: But, there's no way that my sexual expression as it would be, say if I were constantly on, so to speak, the hunt (for sexual encounters). So, my sexual ecstasy now is no way what it was when I was twenty or whatever, and I think most people would say that.	Constituents of the Church would not approve of him finding intimacy and God within consensual one-off sexual encounters with men.	(+) Hunting for sex with another man and yearning for God: Unacceptable to the C of E and these days his sexual ecstasy has changed.
P40b: But, <u>we tell ourselves that our sexual expression must take place in a certain context and I can understand why to a certain extent, but I think that those deepest feelings are therefore, unlikely to be present and we feel a pressure to repress the desire to have those feelings again.</u>	However, the strictures of how, where, when and who he can have sex with, informed by the Church's teaching, makes him represses his deepest desire to have those feelings again.	(-) Strictures of Monogamy: Repress our deepest feelings of yearning for the other and God (CB Gay P40b).
P40c: I don't know what your remit is but pastorally an issue for me that comes up is faithful long-term relationships with an open element, because given all that I've described I can understand that deep desire.	He wrestles with pastoral issues for those long-term couples with an open relationship who wish to have their desire for God and a human other consummated through sexual union with a stranger.	Pastorally: Christian monogamous couples longing to connect with that primitive desire to hunt (CB Gay P40c).
I: Yes, as well as that steadfast relationship, that deep desire and hunger to find God in that other body, next to you.		

P41: <u>Yes! And I think to say, “No, no, no, <u>you can’t do that!</u>” is a form of repression. I’m very reluctant because ultimately if we’re about anything, we’re about flourishing, being true to ourselves and being authentically human. So, for me, that’s a bit of a dilemma::::, <u>particularly in pastoral care.</u></u>	He feels to pastorally dissuade or forbid a person from having a consensual sexual encounter outside of their relationship would constitute repressing a healthy desire, because this would forestall flourishing and lead to inauthenticity.	Pastorally - Christian monogamous couples longing to connect with that primitive desire to hunt: Saying NO is repressive (CB Gay P41).
I: Yes! So, if we’re about flourishing and developing, you would feel some conflict if someone came to see you professionally and said they were in a long-term relationship, but every so often they feel the need to see someone else and they feel very guilty and ashamed.		
P42: <u>I would want to encourage them not to feel guilty and I would probably want to encourage the, err, (0.4) pursuit of those feelings because I think I understand them, <u>and I think they’re authentic and I don’t think they’re a bad thing.</u></u>	He would encourage those parishioners seeking pastoral care on this dilemma not to feel guilty and to pursue their desire.	Pastorally - Christian monogamous couples longing to connect with that primitive desire to hunt: Counsel them not to feel guilty (CB Gay P42).
I: <u>So, you shouldn’t repress them?</u>		
P43: <u>No</u> , which makes me terribly liberal, really! [Shared laughter] Am I saying enough? You would tell me if I wasn’t because I don’t want to waste your time?	He wonders if his pastoral stance on this matter makes him a ‘terrible liberal’ priest and theologian.	
I: You’re saying really important and valuable things, [Are you sure?] and you’re not wasting my time!		
P44: Ok!		

<p>I: You must have been clairvoyant earlier because I'm now going to read a piece from St Theresa of Avila:</p> <p><i>"In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans, and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, now will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body had a share in it – indeed a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks that I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same."</i></p> <p>What's your response to that?</p>		
<p>P45: Can I read it again? [Yes] (0.21) I think for me that is the cost of discipleship: this physical pain which is also a spiritual is so::: <u>deeply powerful</u> which is the cost of pursuing God and the difficulty, really. (0.9) It's the sweetness caused by the intense pain.</p>	<p>He feels that the pain and pleasure that St Theresa attests to in her mystical encounter is at the heart of Christian discipleship and his pursuit of God.</p>	<p>(+) St Theresa of Avila's pain and pleasure: Heart of Christian Discipleship (CB Gay P45).</p>
<p>I: And again, it's about being penetrated isn't it? That image of penetration and she's putting the spiritual and physical together, the erotic and the spiritual, and that's what's painful and yet beautiful.</p>		

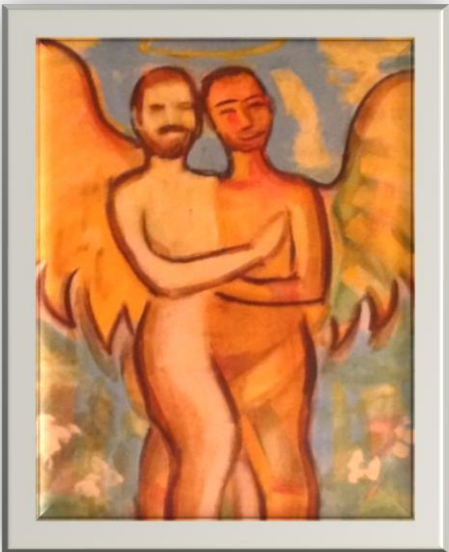
P46: Which of course has <u>illusions</u> , for some, I imagine, with the sexual act.	He imagines for some, that St Theresa's mystical experience has the illusion of a sexual act.	
I: Why did you do that with your face?		
P47: Well, I mean it depends what you like doesn't it. You know, I've never thought about that before <u>but I would imagine frankly a bottom would say that is what the sexual act is like for them; and Theresa seems to be saying <u>that's the sort of sweetness and pain that God evokes in her.</u></u>	He likens his experiences of being the recipient of anal intercourse with another man with the feelings that God evokes for St Theresa: namely, sweetness and pain.	Close to God through gay anal sex: Painful and pleasurable like St Theresa's mystical experience (CB Gay P47).
I: When he enters her in some way, through the Angel.		
P48: When he enters her in some way. The pain of that which we don't really get to the bottom of, <u>but presumably it is God and she is aware that nothing can be sweeter than the One that she seeks.</u> I've never ever thought about it in that way, erm, <u>it's quite incredible isn't it?</u>	He has never thought of his own sexuality and spirituality in these terms before and finds this personal connection quite incredible.	(+) Pain and pleasure of St Theresa's mystical experience: Never linked this before to his sexual preference (CB Gay P48).
I: It is isn't it!		
P49: There's quite a lot of mileage in it, yeah, (0.4) but I think you-	He feels that this insight has a lot of theological application.	
I: Yeah?		
P50: I don't think someone who is a hundred percent top (heterosexual), would ever make that connection.	He is not sure that heterosexuals would understand the connection he is making for himself.	
I: No!		

P51: Which is interesting...	He finds this interesting.	
I: With the sexual?		
P52: With the sexual, so I think this idea is quite exclusive in a way.	He wonders of this way of theologising is exclusive to male-on-male, anal intercourse.	
I: So, I couldn't help but think and let me just offer this.		
P53: Go on...	He's curious about my next question.	
I: When you said, bottom and top, I couldn't help but think of Wolfhart Pannenberg and his theology 'from below' and his theology 'from above'. So, if we think of St Mark it's a theology from 'below', it's very raw and St John is a theology 'from above', it's very spiritual. So, I'm really intrigued that you've got bottom-up, from the physical and sexual to [Oh, wow! That's very interesting!] the spiritual and then top-down, from the spiritual to the physical and the sexual. Does that make sense? I'm taken by your words and I can really see that you're deeply thinking.		
P54: WOW! Ok, that needs a bit of thinking through doesn't it?	He is taken with the idea of a theology from below (the physical, sexual as a route to spiritual) and the theology from above (the spiritual down to the physical and the sexual), and wants to think this through further.	
I: Mm.		

P55: (0.5) I don't know. I've heard it said by others that the most powerful person is the bottom.	He has heard before that the anus is the most powerful part of a person.	(+) The bottom is the most powerful 'person' (CB Gay P55).
I: Mm.		
P56: So, I wonder if it's as clear::::. I wonder if the distinction is that neat, actually but then that might have theological mileage.	He is unsure whether the distinction between a theology from below and above.	
I: So, I suppose what I'm trying to tease out is whether our Church hierarchy teach us about sexuality from a theology 'from above', so it's over-spiritualised?		
P57: <u>I don't think it's spiritualised properly and everything that you've said, I'd love to think about that with other Christians and explore that but we don't. We are 'top down' in a sense that we grapple with a few out of context lines in St Paul and really that's about it!</u>	He believes that our sexuality has not been properly (healthily) theologised and that the C of E is 'top down' in so far as it grapples with de-contextualised texts from St Paul on the matter.	(-) C of E – Sexuality not properly spiritualized: Top-down and not listening from bottom-up (CB Gay P57).
I: Yes.		

<p>P58: I think there is so much wisdom to be gained from some of this material but <u>I think we're quite nervous of saying: "Well, frankly it is akin to spiritual masturbation, these great works of spirituality" because we revere these people so much. I think we're reluctant, we're repressed and quite purist in the Church, sadly, and that's a great shame; and probably one of the great reasons why we don't connect with people very well, because these things are authentically primal experiences and if we don't speak in a language about experiences that are universal to our condition, but in terms of abstract nonsense, then we can't possibly claim to have anything to offer them in terms of interpreting their sexuality, I would imagine.</u></p>	<p>He senses that the Christian mystics union of the sexual and the spiritual makes the purist Church reluctant and repressed and unable to find a universal language to talk about this relationship; and this is probably one of the great reasons that we do not connect with non-church people very well.</p>	<p>(-) C of E Nervous to explore the sexual-spiritual interconnection – impact: Do not speak to the modern age (CB Gay P58).</p>
<p>I: Thinking of your lovely description of bottom, bottom and top, may be because we have this high theology 'from above' then our sexuality, transgender issues or same-sex issues, the whole spectrum: they are 'gods' that cannot be worshipped at the altar, and the 'gods' of heterosexuality can be worshipped in the bedroom, but after that, no can do. But even then, I wonder.</p>		

<p>P59: BUT I THINK MANY OF US who are very unhappy what the Church is saying to us ‘from the top’, adopt a (theological) style which in reality is very ‘bottom-up’ really, which looks to Jesus, not the hierarchy, not the Church, <u>who doesn’t seem to speak about marriage all the time in quite the same way the Church of England seems to</u>; and Jesus and that most intimate embrace with the Beloved Disciple (St. John), (0.5), yeah, so any sense of the right way to behave::: or to live::: or to have sexual relations <u>is just thrown out by that, by that ‘bottom up’</u>; very earthy:::, gospel centred:::, portrait of The Christ. So, I’ll stick with that rather than <i>Some Issues with Human Sexuality</i>, if I may!</p>	<p>Many priests push against the hierarchy’s teachings on sexuality and spirituality adopting a Christo-centric, ‘bottom-up’ approach: a Jesus who does not obsessively talk about (heterosexual) marriage all of the time (like the C of E) and a Jesus who has the most intimate embrace with his beloved disciple, St John. He will take his lead from this rather than <i>Some Issues with Human Sexuality</i></p>	<p>(++) Challenge to the C of E: Bottom-up theology is earthy, Christ-like, permission-giving about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality – he prefers this than <i>Some Issues of Human Sexuality</i> (CB Gay P59).</p>
<p>I: Amen! I’ve got a picture to show you, not my work I hasten to add: it’s a <i>coniunctio</i>.</p>		
<p>P60: It’s a what?</p>	<p>Curious about the word <i>coniunctio</i>.</p>	
<p>I: It’s a <i>coniunctio</i>. Sounds a bit like a sexual act.</p>		
<p>P61: <u>It does a bit</u>, doesn’t it!</p>	<p>He agrees that it sounds like a sexual position or act.</p>	

<p>I: Basically, a <i>coniunctio</i> is when supposedly argued opposites are brought together and integrated in some way. So, if you like, rather than the split of heaven/earth, male/female, spirituality/sexuality, it brings them together in a horizontal place; and it's a portrait of two male Angels. So, I'm going to show you, just study it for a bit and notice what you experience as you look at it.</p>		
		
<p>P62: (0.10) <u>that's really lovely!</u></p>	<p>The gay male <i>coniunctio</i> is experienced as lovely by the participant.</p>	<p>(+) Gay male <i>coniunctio</i>: Lovely (CB Gay P62).</p>
<p>I: What's lovely, what does it make you feel, when you say that?</p>		
<p>P63: The colours are so soft that the characters, the Angels, are really merged but quite clearly retain their separate identities. <u>It's like the two natures of Christ. It's like two becoming one in an act of sexual union.</u> Shouldn't there be four wings? I don't know whether that is significant?</p>	<p>He likes the two gay male angels merging yet retaining their distinct identities, like two becoming one in the act of sexual union, which reminds of</p>	<p>(+) Gay male <i>coniunctio</i>: Conjures up the two natures of Christ becoming one through sexual union (CB Gay P63).</p>

	the two natures of Christ.	
I: So, they are merging.		
P64: So, they are one, they're flying together.	He notices their oneness and that they are flying together.	
I: Yes, and they only have one halo.		
P65: So, they're both bringing something to complete the whole. There's no duplication (0.6) and they're quite different. So, one would assume, in a sense, that they are complementary, with an e, yeah.	For him, there is no duplication and they complement each other creating a whole.	(+) Gay male coniunctio: Difference, complementarity and wholeness (CB Gay P65).
I: That's a lovely description, 'complementary': sexuality and spirituality, earth and heaven, flesh and spirit.		
P66: <u>Which is of course the model that we should be looking at when talking about sexual relations, instead of gender.</u> So, yes, it could be two men, it could be two women, it could be a man and a woman. <u>I've never seen that before.</u>	He believes that this model of sexual relations i.e. complementarity should be employed by the Church rather than a gendered approach.	(++) Challenge to the C of E: Teach inclusively about sexual relations rather than gender (CB Gay P66).
I: It's really taken you, hasn't it? Taken your imagination and may be your heart a bit?		

<p>P67: Yes, because we don't see it, we don't think about it, <u>and again, it's this repression. We need people to see these images and we need them to think about them theologically and what they're saying, because complementarity as an argument, about Genesis and in part about sexuality</u>, these are very abstract things and people don't feel, erm, equipped to use that kind of terminology, of that sort of sophisticated, theological ideas.</p>	<p>He strongly feels that the coniunctio image could be a far more powerful way of talking about sexual relationships rather than arguments relating to The Book of Genesis.</p>	<p>(++) Challenge to the C of E: Needs to speak about sexuality in complementary terms (CB Gay P67).</p>
<p>P67a: So something like this, as you've just asked me "<u>What do you think of that?</u>" <u>is something I'd like to put in front of an Evangelical Conservative</u>, because they will say "That's disgusting!" and I think that is such an illogical, ridiculous thing to say which clearly really isn't, to me <u>that it would just serve to highlight their bigotry</u>.</p>	<p>He would like to place a picture of the gay male <i>coniunctio</i> in front of an Evangelical Christian but believes that they would see this as disgusting and this would highlight their bigotry.</p>	<p>(+) Gay male <i>coniunctio</i>: A Challenge to an Evangelical Conservative (CB Gay P67a).</p>
<p>P67b: So, I'm surprised <u>and I'm moved</u> because I've not seen anything like it <u>and I'd like to see more of it</u> but the top will never disseminate it! It's so simple but yet so rare, which is very::: sad.</p>	<p>He is very surprised and moved by the image and saddened that the hierarchy of the C of E would never disseminate such an image for discussion or as an affirmative stance.</p>	<p>(+) Gay male <i>coniunctio</i>: Moved, sad – Hierarchy never disseminate this (CB Gay P67b).</p>

<p>I: Another, quote from a writer who writes about sexuality and spirituality:</p> <p><i>“Sex is unnervingly significant, so we laugh ... whatever danger we thought sex held for us, it is even worse. Sex really can kill you, if by ‘you’ is meant the ordinary you, the everyday you, the skin encapsulated ego of your everyday persona. It’s not just that sex can be ‘mind blowing’; it’s that sex can show you the face of God ... and more unnerving still ... your deepest self and nature.”</i></p> <p>What does that evoke in you in your feelings as you hear that?</p>		
<p>P68: (0.4) For me it’s a great affirmation of the writings of someone like Harry Williams CR, <u>and I think we need more of that</u>. We should stop the repression, the guilt, and all those sorts of things and we need to recognise that the Christian engagement or encounter with God is holistic; <u>and that God cares for all these feelings</u>.</p>	<p>Wilber’s quite reminds the participant of Harry Williams writing which calls for the inclusion of sex and sexuality in the spiritual life, because encountering God is a holistic experience and God cares for all of our feelings, both sexual and spiritual.</p>	<p>(+) Wilber’s Quote: Stop repression and guilt, embrace God holistically (CB Gay P68).</p>
<p>P68a: I think sex is a prism <u>that just opens up all that we are in a very unique way</u>. I can’t think of anything else <u>that works on so many of our emotions, that gets to so many of our cores, which is also presumably why sex is so often so fucked-up in a sense and goes so badly</u>; and you know, men have all sorts of erectile dysfunctions because of a whole variety of psychological reasons, because it goes to the very core of who we are.</p>	<p>His sense is that sex is the prism that opens him up in such a deep way, going to the very core of who is: sexually and spiritually.</p>	<p>(+) Sex as a prism goes to our core (CB Gay P68a).</p>

P68b: So, a very simple act <u>is just imbued with so much meaning</u> and if we believe <u>that God is the Creator then those things that link is to our Creator can lead us to the Face of God</u> ; and I'd like to say, more than I feel able to in the Church at the moment.	The simple act of having sex is imbued with huge meaning and God the Creator can be encountered in such an experience, which is more than he can say in respect of his relationship with the Church.	(+) Sexuality & spirituality are interconnected: Both can lead us to the Face of God (CB Gay P68b).
I: Thank you. Last question, is there anything you'd like to say about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality that my questions haven't elicited from you?		
P69: (0.4) No, I think you've really got some meaty things. <u>I think it's incredibly invaluable work</u> and I think it's an appalling shame that there isn't more thought in this area.	He believes that my research focus is incredibly invaluable and he feels it is an appalling shame that there is more thought in this area.	
I: Thank you very much!		
P70: Well, I hope that's alright?		
I: That's been fantastic, thank you.		
P71: No, <u>thank you!!!</u>	He has found the experience an affirmative one.	
Time: 44 minutes.		

Appendix F: Critical Research Friend's Analysis

Critical Research Friend's Coding		
I: First, thing to say to you is thank you for this time.		
P1: That's alright.		
I: Because I know time is precious and this is a very pertinent topic at the moment that the Church needs to get a grip on and needs to be challenged about, a bit more.		
P2: Absolutely!		
I: The first question, can you describe what happens to you when you're having a spiritual experience?		
P3: (0.4) What happens to me physically?	← Straight away he goes to physical	
I: Physically, emotionally, psychologically, and bodily.		
P4: I think a sense of enveloping love, erm, and sometimes a kind of a tingle down the spine that's akin to a particularly moving moment in a film or something, but I think a sense of God's presence... and omniscience... for me. Erm, a peace, a sense of harmony in creation, a joy REALLY!	Spiritual exp. as a sense of enveloping love - a wrap, embrace, hug, contact Trills, chills, highest moments of pleasure. Intensely rewarding. Breathlessness. Heightened sense of emotional intensity going through him. Awesome also frightening, hair raising euphoric, endorphins, oxytocin mirror neurons	
I: So when you've had that real sense of tingling down the spine, being enveloped by God, and feeling that peace and that love, when you come out of that place, how does that effect you in how you see other people, see the world? Does it change anything?	compared to emotional moment in film. In body then out of body? music? presence of the other	
P5: I think it's such a warm feeling that you feel the desire to share it. Somehow your party to something that is a life enhancing thing and you want to share it with others, because it's a good thing, ultimately.	awareness, perceiving all Connectional embodiment Creativity Warmth Connectional beyond beauty	

<p>P5a: I think those moments bolster... <u>one's faith</u> because of course there are times when you don't feel like that and it's about holding onto some of those particularly special moments.</p>	<p>- Holding onto those moments as a bolster, a pillow for support for faith</p> <p>- pronoun use</p>	
<p>I: I'm just wondering about those feelings you've just described. Have you had those outside of a sacred space and if so, where would that be?</p>		
<p>P6: I don't think it has to be a sacred space, I think sometimes it can be elsewhere with music, art, err, literature, you know, any kind of art form, I think. (0.4) Yeah, (0.3) I don't think it's particularly tied to churches.</p> <p><u>He is thinking</u></p>	<p>- feelings can be experienced in multiple contexts and any kind of art form.</p> <p>- Repetition of 'think'</p>	
<p>I: No, so you can have those same feelings in other contexts?</p>		
<p>P7: Yes, and with kind people, [Mm] <u>people</u> can, inspirational <u>people</u> can <u>trigger</u> those feelings.</p>	<p>- Now he's moving to relational aspects: kind people, inspirational people. Repetition of 'people' which people?</p>	

Trigger
stimulus → reaction or series
of reactions.

<p>I: I'm going to read you a piece from St John of the Cross:</p> <p><i>"On my flowery bosom, Kept whole for Him alone, There he reposed and slept; and I cherished Him, And the waving of the cedars fanned Him.</i></p> <p><i>As His hair floated in the breeze, that from the turret blew, He struck me on the neck, With his gentle hand, And all sensation left me.</i></p> <p><i>I continued in oblivion lost, My head was resting on my love; lost to all things and myself, and amid the lilies forgotten, threw All my cares away."</i></p> <p>What's your reaction to that piece?</p>		
<p>P8: (0.5) Well, it's very erotic, [Huh, huh] clearly; erm, can I read it again?</p>	<p>Sexual desire He needs to read it again to take it in</p>	
<p>I: Yea, please, do.</p>		
<p>P9: (0.8) I think that's a more elaborate feeling of my enveloping. I think that's a more erotic image:::</p>	<p>He moves into feelings which he sees as more 'elaborate' - perhaps excessive detail? Too much detail for him in this moment?</p>	
<p>I: So when you pick up on the erotic and the spiritual that you shared with me earlier, how does it speak or not?</p>	<p>Converting his 'enveloping' into embodied eroticism.</p>	<p>owned</p>

↳ not his

P10: I don't <u>think</u> it speaks to me particularly, erm, but I can see how it would for others.	- Does not 'speak' to him	
P10a: It must depend on the form the erotic takes for <u>an individual</u> and for <u>some people</u> who are eroticising spiritual experience, because <u>that's there</u> only form of eroticism, then I would <u>imagine</u> that would be incredibly powerful, which sounds like, you know, what St John is saying. I don't think it entirely works for me.	- Moves to third person - either / or position - that's their <u>only</u> form of eroticism → he <u>imagines</u> that would be <u>incredibly</u> powerful for them	
P10b: <u>But</u> , God sleeping on his chest. I mean I think that's lovely and I think that speaks to me of the Incarnation, of the intimacy that God shares our form with <u>us</u> and walked with <u>us</u> , and for me, that sort of goes with the powerful image of John 1: "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us". That <u>pitching the tent</u> among us and that image of God lying on our chest that work's quite well for me.	use of 'But' here - God sleeping on his chest <u>intimacy</u> speaks to <u>him</u> of intimacy of God sharing form and walking with <u>us</u> . Relational, social aspect - An erotic unconscious statement at this point?	
I: You were smiling as you said that.		
P11: I like that: THAT's BEAUTIFUL, I've never heard this before!	- This is all new to him	
I: Right! So intensely erotic and intensely spiritual.		
P12: <u>It is</u> , of course they are!	→ both / and	
I: What do you mean, of course they are?	"St Theresa struggled because there were few who could understand or appreciate her inner ecstasies. However, on the one hand she felt these experiences to be more real than ordinary events"	
P13: Well, I think that's our history of our spirituality. <u>St Theresa of Avila</u> would be a bigger example of that but I'm not an expert on her writing or St	Biography St Theresa Avila - Biography online	

John's. For me, I always had it in my head that St John is more <u>dark night of the soul</u> stuff, but I hadn't realise that there's more to his writing.	→ Divine Union	
I: With the Christian Mystics, there's this dark night or negation, and then they work through this process and come out into the light. It's almost post-coital after the wilderness of the darkness.		
P14: Mm.		
I: When you're in the throes of sexual experience with another man, can you share, what's your experience like when you're in that heightened sexual union with another man? What's that like for you?		
P15: Well::, <u>I think</u> , <u>I think</u> it's a deeply spiritual moment because it is the sense of the <u>basest</u> part of our humanity, and I don't mean that in a negative way, but <u>I think</u> it's without all the crap of our psychology to a certain extent.	- Repetition - he is thinking - basest - Base - the bottom Support on which a thing stands or rests	
P15a: It's very sort of <u>raw::</u> , <u>simple::</u> , <u>primal::</u> , <u>encounter::</u> , and since <u>we hold very strongly</u> that we're created in God's image and function as we do with God as the Creator of all that we are, then there is a sense in which <u>that moment aligns us</u> in some way with the faith that we hold.	- emphasis - relational Christians? - who are we? You and him? - co-operation or agreement	

<p>P15b: <u>AND</u>, for me, I have always been quite deeply influenced by the idea of The Trinity being about the embrace of the other and that the whole surrender to the other. To a certain extent, depending on the specific logistics of any kind of sexual encounter that can be felt and experienced for human beings, both ways. So, I always found, without it being a threesome or whatever, there is something quite Trinitarian about it, a deep, sort of intimate union.</p>	<p>→ Moving to a personal level → trinity is unity → AS in P4. enveloping → yielding to the power of another Both / and experience → He qualifies not talking about a threesome – rather deep, intimate union.</p>	
<p>I: When you say that, the word comes into my head, when you're in the throes of the sexual, heightened experience, I can imagine it being a deeply spiritual penetration. Or maybe, I'm putting words into your mouth.</p>		
<p>P16: I think often, I think – I'm not sure what you want me to say [I want you to say what you need to say] – I think <u>we</u> can project some lovely ideas into the sexual act and to a certain extent I can understand some of those feelings, but I think the reality often is, none of these things go through one's head [No, no] at the time.</p>	<p>→ Is he confused about what you want him to say as he is trying to please? → You and him are projecting → He can now understand the feelings → His experience has been that none of the things go through one's head → pronoun use – him and people in general?</p>	
<p>I: So when you're in the throes of sexual experience how does it change you?</p>		
<p>P17: Well it taps into a deep, to two things: a deep vulnerability and a deep powerfulness...., really, to a greater or lesser extent. I mean that's the essence of the human condition, to be vulnerable and to be powerful.</p>	<p>→ Draw of liquid – opening a tap → Both meaning → Pivotal to his experience the essence of the human condition.</p>	
<p>I: At the same time?</p>		

P18: At the same time, at different times, erm, yeah.	- Born/and	
I: So when you <u>come out</u> of that powerful and vulnerable experience does it change you in anyway afterwards? How do you see other people in the world?	;	
P19: There is an ecstasy in it, I think. I mean it's very affirming, if it's a good experience, it can be very affirming.	- Qualities like 'it is good'	
* P19a: If it is a bad experience it can be <u>terribly devastating</u> and cause all kinds of <u>insecurity and vulnerability</u> .	- threatening or devastating - He now mixes insecurity and vulnerability	
P19b: I mean I <u>think</u> there is an enormous difference between sex as result of a sort of, a sort of hunt and sex as a part of a monogamous, long term relationship. I think there about different things. I think desire plays a role differently in both cases, you know, in the sense that desire in a hunt can be quite akin to the search for God.	- repetition a sort of hunt hunt Seeking? pursuit? chase? - Desire is different in both cases. the comparison the desire in the hunt can be quite akin to the search for God.	
P19c: That absolute yearning:::: [Mm] for <u>someone</u> , falls very much when you're in those <u>dark moments</u> when you think your faith is a load of old <u>bullshit</u> but you're desperate for a sign:::: of some affirmation.	- Yearning for someone? Who? - desperation searching for affirmation	

P19d: I would like to be able to say that's the same in a (monogamous) relationship but I don't think it is, really, in quite the same way. I think that lends itself to other spiritual ideas, but that sort of raw, obsessive -	- Not the same in a monogamous relationship - Raw, obsessive	
I: Hunt?		
P20: <u>Hunting, yearning.</u>		
I: For the other?		
P21: For another, <u>the Other.</u>	- For THE other completion, wholeness	
I: Is that where you're vulnerable and being powerfulness fit in, if it's been a good experience?		
P22: Yeah, I can't think of anything else in all our interactions that would arouse the intensity of feelings in that experience.	- Unique as an interaction intensity of feelings in the experience	
I: I find that, what you've just shared with me incredibly powerful and very moving.		
P23: I've never particularly thought about it before.	- This has emerged from the interview for the first time	
I: Yeah, I know.		
P24: <u>We don't, do we?</u>	- Relational first person	
I: No, we don't.		
P25: Which is why, it's important that you're doing what you're doing.	- He is valuing the research	
I: A strange question.		

P26: Go on.	- He's interested	
I: Have you ever had those kind of intense sexual feelings when you're in a Church service, when you're praying or taking the Eucharist?		
P27: About what's going on or being distracted by those thoughts, quite independently?	- He qualifies your question Not sure he knows what you mean	
I: Well you might be distracted but I don't want to put words into your mouth. Have you ever had a real rapturous sense of the Divine and suddenly the erotic come up during a service		
P28: No.		
I: Never.		
P29: No. I wish it would!	- He is open to the idea.	
I: (Laughs) Why do you wish it would?		
P30: I think because my faith is quite intellectualised, erm, and you know St John's image and others, his mystical ecstasy is akin to a sexual feeling, and I think that must be incredible.	- He knows his faith is intellectualized - He thinks that must be incredible	
I: So you would like that?		
P31: I'd love that!		
I: You would? So, going back to the hunt and it's been a good experience maybe that's your way to access, well not just embracing another...		
P32: Yes! Yes!		
I: But to...		
P33: Yes.		
I: To access the Divine Other.		

P34: Yes. Yes.		
I: That's what I'm wondering, to if you like, de-intellectualise?		
P35: <u>Yes! Yes! Yes!</u>	— Erotic?	
I: And maybe get into your body, I wonder?		
P36: Yes, but that raises all kinds of ethical questions doesn't it which <u>prevent us</u> , <u>prevent me</u> from doing that.	— Back in his head He intellectualizes. — prevent <u>us</u> , then prevent <u>me</u>	
I: Can you say a bit more about that, when you say ethics?		
P37: Say more about that?	— Not sure	
I: Yes.		
P38: I think the constraints of ministry, Christianity and the Church, as they are at the moment, I mean if I were to say that for me, sort of: "My <u>rawest feelings</u> about desire for God and for the other, are invoked when I'm on the hunt for a <u>shag</u> ", then I, then I, I think that would be frowned upon by the majority of the Church.	— Constraints of the Church } Goes into his feelings then quickly back into thinking — frowned upon Is he frowning upon himself?	
I: Yes, but what do you feel and think, let's forget the Church for a moment.		
P39: I think <u>we're</u> really repressing ourselves very clearly and I think that's dangerous. All sorts of	— Danger in repression	

repression is dangerous.		
I: Yeah, and the pressure we feel as clergy, some of us who don't conform to a particular template, puts huge psychological pressure on us [It does. It does] or even distress or guilt or inner conflicts.		
P40: Very interesting. (0.5) I can only speak personally and I will, I mean my sexual expression is in a faithful, long term (same-sex) relationship which I think in terms of the Church ticks most of the boxes for the constituents of the Church that who are going to embrace those kinds of things.	<p>— moves into personal here</p> <p>faithful, long-term (same sex) relⁿ</p> <p>— ticks the boxes for some</p>	
P40a: But, there's no way that my sexual expression as it would be, say if I were constantly on, so to speak, the hunt (for sexual encounters). So my sexual ecstasy now is no way what it was when I was twenty or whatever, and I think most people would say that.	<p>use of but.</p> <p>— He generalizes here</p>	
P40b: But, we tell ourselves that our sexual expression must take place in a certain context and I can understand why to a certain extent, but I think that those deepest feelings are therefore, unlikely to be present and we feel a pressure to repress the desire to have those feelings again.	<p>— in one context</p> <p>— He feels pressure to repress the desire to have those feelings again</p> <p>Who is we here?</p>	

<p>P40c: I don't know what you're remit is but pastorally an issue for me that comes up is faithful long term relationships with an open element, because given all that I've described I can understand that deep desire.</p>	<p>— Testing</p> <p>— He can understand rel's with an open element for others</p>	
<p>I: Yes, as well as that steadfast relationship, that deep desire and hunger to find God in that other body, next to you.</p>		
<p>P41: Yes! And I think to say, "No, no, no, you can't do that!" is a form of repression. I'm very reluctant because ultimately if we're about anything, <u>we're about flourishing, being true to ourselves, and being authentically human.</u> So for me, that's a bit of a dilemma:::, particularly in pastoral care.</p>	<p>— Reluctance to judge rel's in pastoral care.</p> <p>— growing, thriving</p> <p>— development of true self</p> <p>— a bit of a dilemma</p>	
<p>I: Yes! So if we're about flourishing and developing, you would feel some conflict if someone came to see you professionally and said they were in a long term relationship, but every so often they feel the need to see someone else and they feel very guilty and ashamed.</p>		
<p>P42: I would want to encourage them not to feel guilty and I would probably want to encourage the, err, (0.4) <u>pursuit of those feelings because I think I understand them, and I think they're authentic and I don't think they're a bad thing.</u></p>	<p>— He would encourage the hunt?</p> <p>— authenticity</p>	
<p>I: So you shouldn't repress them?</p>		

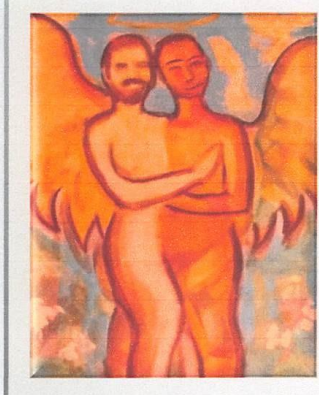
P43: No, which makes me terribly liberal, really! [Shared laughter] Am I saying enough? You would tell me if I wasn't because I don't want to waste your time?	→ Is he concerned about what he is saying? Asking for guidance?	
I: You're saying really important and valuable things, [Are you sure?] and you're not wasting my time!	→ Not sure	
P44: Ok!		
<p>I: You must have been clairvoyant earlier because I'm now going to read a piece from St Theresa of Avila:</p> <p><i>"In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans, and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, now will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body had a share in it – indeed a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks that I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same."</i></p> <p>What's your response to that?</p>		

P45: Can I read it again? [Yes] (0.21) I think for me that is the cost of discipleship: this physical pain which is also a spiritual is so::: <u>deeply powerful</u> which is the cost of <u>pursuing</u> God and the difficulty, really. (0.9) It's the sweetness caused by the intense pain.	deeply powerful ← pursuing God - the hunt	
I: And again, it's about being penetrated isn't it? That image of penetration and she's putting the spiritual and physical together, the erotic and the spiritual, and that's what's painful and yet beautiful.		
P46: Which of course has illusions, for some, I imagine, with the sexual act.	- for some, not for him!	
I: Why did you do that with your face?		
P47: Well, I mean it depends what you like doesn't it. You know, I've never thought about that before but I would imagine frankly a bottom would say that is what the sexual act is like for them; and Theresa seems to be saying <u>that's the sort of sweetness and pain that God evokes in her.</u>	- A bottom would say that (not a top) - and Theresa Not him	
I: When he enters her in some way, through the Angel.		
P48: When he enters her in some way. The pain of that which we don't really get to <u>the bottom of</u> , but presumably it is God and she is aware that nothing can be sweeter than the <u>One</u> that she seeks. I've <u>never ever</u> thought about it in that way, erm, it's quite incredible isn't it?	- Sweeter - taste - Emerging from the interview - It's quite incredible opening to new thoughts	
I: It isn't it!		
P49: There's quite a lot of <u>mileage</u> in it, yeah, (0.4) but I think you-	range, span	

I: Yeah?		
P50: I don't think someone who is a hundred percent top (heterosexual), would ever make that connection.	- Doesn't he also mean 100% top as opposed to bottom or versatile? Isn't that him?	
I: No!	He is thinking of sex?	
P51: Which is interesting...		
I: With the sexual?		
P52: With the sexual, so I think this idea is quite exclusive in a way.	- exclusive to bottoms	
I: So I couldn't help but think and let me just offer this.		
P53: Go on...		
I: When you said, bottom and top, I couldn't help but think of Wolfhart Pannenberg and his theology 'from below' and his theology 'from above'. So, if we think of St Mark it's a theology from 'below', it's very raw and St John is a theology 'from above', it's very spiritual. So I'm really intrigued that you've got bottom-up, from the physical and sexual to [Oh, wow! That's very interesting!] the spiritual and then top-down, from the spiritual to the physical and the sexual. Does that make sense? I'm taken by your words and I can really see that you're deeply thinking.	- He's interested	
P54: WOW! Ok, that needs a bit of thinking through doesn't it?	- He's now thinking of spirituality as bottom-up and top-down.	
I: Mm.		
P55: (0.5) I don't know. I've heard it said <u>by others</u> that the most powerful person is the bottom.	- by others	Who?
I: Mm.		
P56: So, I wonder if it's as clear.... I wonder if the distinction is that neat,		

actually but then that might have theological mileage.	He is now thinking as spiritual.	
I: So, I suppose what I'm trying to tease out is whether our Church hierarchy teach us about sexuality from a theology 'from above', so it's over-spiritualised?		
P57: I don't think it's spiritualised properly and everything that you've said, I'd love to think about that with other Christians and explore that but we don't. We are 'top down' in a sense that we grapple with a few out of context lines in St Paul and really that's about it!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not spiritualised properly As he is doing in this interview Christians? 	
I: Yes.		
P58: I think there is so much wisdom to be gained from some of this material but I think we're quite nervous of saying: "Well, frankly it is akin to spiritual masturbation, these great works of spirituality" because we revere these people so much. I think we're reluctant, we're repressed and quite purist in the Church, sadly, and that's a great shame; and probably one of the great reasons why we don't connect with people very well, because these things are authentically primal experiences and if we don't speak in a language about experiences that are universal to our condition, but in terms of abstract nonsense, then we can't possibly claim to have anything to offer them in terms of interpreting their sexuality, I would imagine.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> top down his view / Church's view Why we don't connect with people authenticity ... don't speak in a language about experiences abstract nonsense interpreting their sexuality He imagines 	

I: Thinking of your lovely description of bottom, bottom and top, may be because we have this high theology 'from above' then our sexuality, transgender issues or same-sex issues, the whole spectrum: they are 'gods' that cannot be worshipped at the altar, and the 'gods' of heterosexuality can be worshipped in the bedroom, but after that, no can do. But even then, I wonder.		
<p>P59: <u>BUT I THINK MANY OF US</u> who are very unhappy what the Church is saying to us 'from the top', adopt a (theological) style which in reality is very 'bottom-up' really, which looks to Jesus, not the hierarchy, not the Church, <u>who doesn't seem to speak about marriage all the time in quite the same way the Church of England seems to;</u> and Jesus and that most intimate embrace with the Beloved Disciple (St. John), (0.5), yeah, so any sense of the right way to behave:: or to live:: or to have sexual relations <u>is just thrown out by that, by that 'bottom up';</u> very earthy::, gospel centred::, portrait of The Christ. So, I'll stick with that rather than <i>Some Issues with Human Sexuality</i>, if I may!</p>	<p>— More than him, many — He starts to speak out</p>	
I: Amen! I've got a picture to show you, not my work I hasten to add: it's a <i>coniunctio</i> .		
P60: It's a what?		
I: It's a <i>coniunctio</i> . Sounds a bit like a sexual act.		
P61: <u>It does a bit</u> , doesn't it!		

<p>I: Basically a <i>coniunctio</i> is when supposedly argued opposites are brought together and integrated in some way. So, if you like, rather than the split of heaven/earth, male/female, spirituality/sexuality, it brings them together in a horizontal place; and it's a portrait of two male Angels. So I'm going to show you, just study it for a bit and notice what you experience as you look at it.</p>		
		
<p>P62: (0.10) <u>that's really lovely!</u></p>		
<p>I: What's lovely, what does it make you feel, when you say that?</p>		
<p>P63: The colours are <u>so soft</u> that the characters, the Angels, are really merged but quite clearly retain their separate identities. <u>It's like the two natures of Christ.</u> It's like two becoming one in an act of sexual union. Shouldn't there be four wings? I don't know whether that is significant?</p>	<p>Divine & human nature distinct, though inseparably united in Christ</p>	
<p>I: So they are merging.</p>		
<p>P64: So they are one, they're flying together.</p>	<p>He is understanding</p>	

I: Yes and they only have one halo.		
P65: So they're both bringing something to <u>complete the whole</u> . There's no duplication (0.6) and they're quite different. So one would assume, in a sense, that they are complementary, with an e, yeah.	Completing the whole forming a complement	
I: That's a lovely description, 'complementary': sexuality and spirituality, earth and heaven, flesh and spirit.		
P66: Which is of course the model that we should be looking at when talking about sexual relations, instead of gender. So, yes, it could be two men, it could be two women, it could be a man and a woman. I've never seen that before.	He has not ^{never} seen this before wonder	
I: It's really taken you, hasn't it? Taken your imagination and may be your heart a bit?		
P67: Yes, because <u>we don't see it</u> , we don't think about it, and again, it's <u>this repression</u> . <u>We need</u> people to see these images and <u>we need</u> them to think about them theologically and what they're saying, because <u>complementarity as an argument</u> , about Genesis and in part about <u>sexuality</u> , these are very abstract things and <u>people</u> don't feel, erm, equipped to use that kind of terminology, of those sort of sophisticated, theological ideas.	Repression which people? him?	

<p>P67a: So something like this, as you've just asked me "What do you think of that?" is something I'd like to put in front of an Evangelical Conservative, because they will say "<u>That's disgusting!</u>" and I think that is such an illogical, ridiculous thing to say which clearly really isn't, to me that it would just serve to highlight their bigotry.</p>	<p>His anger</p> <p>prejudice</p>	
<p>P67b: So, I'm surprised and I'm moved because I've not see anything like it and I'd like to see more of it but the top will never disseminate it! It's so simple but yet so rare, which is very::: sad.</p>	<p>He is moved</p> <p>He would like to see more</p> <p>The top will never disseminate it.</p>	
<p>I: Another, quote from a writer who writes about sexuality and spirituality:</p> <p><i>"Sex is unnervingly significant, so we laugh ... whatever danger we thought sex held for us, it is even worse. Sex really can kill you, if by 'you' is meant the ordinary you, the everyday you, the skin encapsulated ego of your everyday persona. It's not just that sex can be 'mind blowing'; it's that sex can show you the face of God ... and more unnerving still ... your deepest self and nature."</i></p> <p>What does that evoke in you in your feelings as you hear that?</p>		

P68: (0.4) For me it's a great affirmation of the writings of someone like Harry Williams CR, and I think we need more of that. We should stop the repression, the guilt, and all those sorts of things and we need to recognise that the Christian engagement or encounter with God is holistic; and that God cares for all these feelings.	<p>"Growth became possible for him as he recognized how much of his own church-based religion was a flight from the development of a person's true self, which substituted for the true God whose love had created him, the distorted image of a sadistic persecutor" - The Guardian Mon 20 Feb 2006.</p> <p>metaphor</p>	
P68a: I think sex is a prism that just opens up all that we are in a very unique way. I can't think of anything else that works on so many of our emotions, that gets to so many of our cores, which is also presumably why sex is so often so fucked-up in a sense and goes so badly; and you know, men have all sorts of erectile dysfunctions because of a whole variety of psychological reasons, because it goes to the very core of who we are.	<p>- sex as a prism - opens up all that we are in a very unique way. A prism has a triangular base (3 sides) Trinity? Polished surfaces that refract light. Can break up light into its constituent spectral colours (rainbow). Reflects light, splits up into components with different Polarization.</p>	
P68b: So a very simple act is just imbued with so much meaning and if we believe that God is the Creator then those things that link us to our Creator can lead us to the Face of God; and I'd like to say, more than I feel able to in the Church at the moment.	<p>- God is the Creator the Face of God.</p> <p>- He would like to say more than he feels able to in the church at the moment.</p>	
I: Thank you. Last question, is there anything you'd like to say about the relationship between sexuality and spirituality that my questions haven't elicited from you?		
P69: (0.4) No, I think you've really got some <u>meaty</u> things. I think it's <u>incredibly invaluable</u> work and I think it's an appalling shame that there isn't more thought in this area.	<p>- Rich in context, thought provoking</p> <p>- <u>incredibly invaluable</u> work</p>	
I: Thank you very much!		
P70: Well, I hope that's alright?	<p>- He likes to please?</p>	

Appendix G: Overview of Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

THEME ONE: The Relationship between Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy	Number of Times Theme Appears:	By Whom:
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy are in a Dialectical Relationship	20	Harriet, Hannah, Henry, Hugh, Howard, Hadley, Linda, George, Gabriel, Graham, Gareth, Glen, Greg, Gregory, Grant, Gerald, Beatrice, Leonard-Barry, Tess and Tamara
<u>Subtheme:</u> Sexual and Spiritual Ecstasy are in a Dualistic Relationship	2	Helen and Geoffrey
THEME TWO: Mystical Union through Sexual Ecstasy and the Aftereffects	Number of Times Theme Appears:	By Whom:
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> The Presence and Impact of Transcendent Sex	12	Hadley, Henry, Howard, Linda, Leonard-Barry, Gareth, Gerald, Glen, Grant, Greg, Gregory and Tamara
<u>Subtheme:</u> Experiencing the Sexual Ecstasy during a Public Act of Worship	3	Hadley, Leonard-Barry and Howard
<u>Subtheme:</u> Barriers to Experiencing <i>Unio Mystica</i> through Sexual Ecstasy	8	Hannah, Tess, Gabriel, Graham, Beatrice, Hugh, George and Harriet
<u>Subtheme:</u> The Shadow Side of Sexuality	6	Hugh, Beatrice, Gareth, Graham, Grant and Harriet
THEME THREE: The <i>Coniunctio</i>	Number of Times Theme Appears:	By Whom:
Heterosexual <i>Coniunctio</i>		
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> Mixed Responses - Critique and Adjustments Suggested	8	Henry, Hugh, Hannah, Helen, Harriet, Howard, Leonard-Barry and Beatrice
<u>Subtheme:</u> Negative Responses - Critique and Adjustments Suggested	2	Tamara and Hadley
<u>Subtheme:</u> Positive Response - No Critique or Adjustments Suggested	1	Tess
Lesbian <i>Coniunctio</i>		
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> Positive Responses - Further Additions Suggested	2	Linda and Beatrice
<u>Subtheme:</u> Negative Response: Critique and Adjustments Suggested	1	Tamara
Gay <i>Coniunctio</i>		
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> Positive Responses of Affirmation	6	Glen, Greg, Gabriel, Gareth, Graham and Leonard-Barry
<u>Subtheme:</u> Mixed Responses – Critique and Adjustments Suggested	2	Gregory and George
<u>Subtheme:</u> Negative Responses - Critique and Adjustments Suggested	2	Gerald and Geoffrey
THEME FOUR: The House of Bishops and the C of E Hierarchy	Number of Times Theme Appears:	By Whom:
<u>Superordinate Theme:</u> Highly critical of the House of Bishops Official Teaching on Human Sexuality and Same-sex Relationships	17	Hadley, Linda, Tamara, Tess, Beatrice, Hannah, Helen, Howard, Henry, Gabriel, Gareth, Geoffrey, Gerald, Glen, Graham and Gregory
<u>Subtheme:</u> Feels put down by male priests who do not accept her as a woman priest	1	Harriet
<u>Subtheme:</u> Feels grateful that he was not raised in a religious family	1	Leonard-Barry
<u>Subtheme:</u> Feels burdened by the non-affirming stance of his gay identity	1	Grant
<u>Subtheme:</u> Feels affirmed by God as a Gay man	1	George
<u>Subtheme:</u> Feels the House of Bishops should address the shadow side of sexuality	1	Hugh