

A DESCRIPTION OF PRACTISING CHRISTIANS' EXPERIENCE OF
PROFOUND SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS

by

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This qualitative study explored the meaning and description of profound sexual and spiritual connection among practising Christians. Investigations of the conditions and events that led to these peak encounters as well as the aftereffects of such experiences were also conducted. It was purposed that this research would enhance understanding of sexual and spiritual connection, inform theories of love, transpersonal experience, and Christian theology regarding sexuality, as well as provide counsellors with some initial strategies to promote more holistic sexual intimacy among their Christian clientele.

The methods of inquiry and data analysis were based on a phenomenological approach. The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with five men and five women, representing five Christian denominations, who had experienced a profound event that was simultaneously sexual and spiritual. The statements within each participant's transcript were analyzed to discover clusters of meaningful themes. A follow-up interview with each contributor validated these individual or "situated structural" descriptions. Twenty-five common themes emerged from the interview data and a fundamental structure or "common story" was culled from the exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The themes of the sexual and spiritual encounter were categorized into the into the following three phases: Preconditions and Facilitating Events; Descriptive Themes of the Encounter; and Aftereffects. The exhaustive description and fundamental structure were validated by all the participants in a final follow-up consultation.

The study results offered an empirical and experiential basis for previous conjectures on linking sexuality and spirituality. The findings were interpreted in light of existing research on love, transpersonal mystical experience, and Christian theology on sexuality. Comparisons were made to the experience of transcendental sex experienced by Tantric

practitioners. Potentials for individual and relational growth were explored. Following these interpretations, a number of specific recommendations were made for future research and counselling practice.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Introduction

Spirituality and sexuality are two fundamental forces in human development and behaviour. "Of all the enigmas encountered by man [and woman] during his [and her] earthly existence, the relationship between sexuality and spirituality is surely one of the strangest of all mazes" (Moore, 1980, p. 1). Regardless of which religion, culture, or period of history, the relationship between sexuality and spirituality has been a topic of discussion (Murray, 1991). The ancients considered sexual union to be the closest encounter with divine bliss that humans could achieve (Gilles, 1978). Some religions, especially those espousing Eastern Tantric traditions, view sexuality as integral to spiritual pursuit (Francoeur, 1992). In contrast, Western civilization and Christianity has generally opposed the integration of sexuality and spirituality (Ammerman, 1990; Coll, 1989). Dualism, inherited from early Hellenistic philosophies, promotes the alienation of the sexual body and the eternal spirit and that true spirituality is antithetical to sexuality.

Although current Western culture continues to be intrigued and fascinated by sex (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1995), spirituality has "come out of the closet" (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992). People in contemporary society seem to be seeking more meaning, purpose, and connectedness with self, others, and the transcendent (Collins, 1992; MacKnee, 1997; Moore, 1994; Schnarch, 1991; Taylor, 1994). Those identified as Christians seem more motivated to accept God's relational presence in all areas of life (Hurding, 1995) and exhibit more openness to at least discuss sexuality (Smedes, 1994). Yet, something appears to be missing in human relational experience. Perhaps today the "zeitgeist" is open to a more holistic orientation towards integrating all dimensions of human experience.

That sexuality and spirituality are related has received extensive philosophical and theoretical attention from various disciplines (e.g., Aging and Development--Ammerman, 1990; Medicine--Anderson & Morgan, 1994; Christian Theology--Bilotta, 1981; Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985; Dychtwald, 1979; Feuerstein, 1989; Grenz, 1990; Moore, 1980;

Nelson, 1981, 1983; Sex Therapy--Mayo, 1987; Schnarch, 1991; Psychology--Francoeur, 1992; May, 1982; Moore, 1994). Some (e.g., Carnes, 1987; Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, Moore, Schnarch) suggest that spirituality is an important component of human sexual potential. Others (e.g., Feuerstein; Francoeur, Moore, 1985; Nelson, Rohr, 1982) propose that if humans desire to grow spiritually, they must integrate their sexual urges into their spiritual needs. Humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology, holistic health, changes in religious perspectives, plus heightened interest in spirituality have influenced contemporary views so that spirituality and sexuality are not seen as opposing dichotomies but rather as two sides of the same coin. According to the authors cited above, reconciling and relating the two dimensions facilitates growth of the whole person and of human relationships.

The time is ripe for deeper comprehension regarding the linking of experiential spirituality and wholesome sexuality. The mysterious nature of the connection between these two phenomena could be understood as a "peak experience" (MacKnee, 1996; Mosher, 1980; Maslow, 1964, 1971). Sokol (1986) and Sovastsky (1985) are the only published researchers who have attempted to decipher transcendental states in sexuality. These two available studies have been limited in several ways. First, Sokol's and Sovastsky's phenomenological explorations involved only those people who were practitioners of Tantric or Yogic traditions. These Eastern spiritual "co-researchers" were trained in techniques that opened them to seek and to promote spiritual and sexual connection. Examining only this select subject group further alienates sexuality and spirituality from Christian experience. What about people from Western Christian tradition, without Tantric influence, who have experienced a profound connection between sexuality and spirituality? What are the distinctives of this group's experience? A second limitation of previous research is that although some of the meaningful themes experienced in this mysterious relationship are described and elucidated, there is little or no exploration of the preconditions and facilitating events that led to a profound sexual and spiritual encounter. What were the steps toward this deeper level of connection? Finally, the personal and

relational effects of this mysterious experience of connecting spiritually and sexually is lacking.

Because much of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality is based on theory, conjecture, and Eastern spiritual traditions and practitioners, it is necessary to provide people from a Western spiritual influence--Christians--an opportunity to advance descriptive understanding of their meaningful encounters that were simultaneously spiritual and sexual. Also, Christian practitioners are notorious for asserting that sex is God's gift to humanity, yet struggling to recognise the wonder and fullness of their own sexual experience (Wiseman, 1996). In response to these needs, the research question for this study was: What is the meaning and description of profound sexual and spiritual experience among practising Christians?

Purpose of the Study

Through gathering reports from people who would classify themselves as "practising Christians," the aim of this study was to develop thematic descriptions of profound encounters that were simultaneously sexual and spiritual from a Christian perspective. As well, this investigation was intended to elicit some understanding of the events or "path" that promoted and enhanced these mystical experiences. It was also purposed to gain some insights about the personal and relational effects of connecting sexually and spiritually.

Exploring the meaningful relationship between spirituality and sexuality experienced in human intimacy was also intended to increase understanding and development of what it means to be more "fully human" or whole within Christianity. Discovering how these two dimensions are experienced concurrently could unpack some of the mystery of "one flesh" phenomenon. Christians could gain empathic and clarifying responses to celebrating some of the meaning and awe that comes through self-discovery, the discovery of an intimate other, and the discovery of God's passion.

Another purpose of this study was to provide an empirical and experiential foundation for existing and future theoretical postulations. Previous speculations about the

connection between sexuality and spirituality have been based on isolated accounts. Psychological conjectures on love, transpersonal psychology's perspectives on mystical peak experience, and Christian theology on sexuality could be informed by the outcomes of this research. This investigation aimed to contribute toward developing a theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon within a Christian worldview and to offer practical implications based on data gained through systematic methodology.

As these aims are realised, it was hoped that an enhanced understanding of human functioning would aid in personal and relational counselling among Christian adherents. Individuals could be encouraged and tentatively directed towards finding more wholeness and personal integration. Couples might be aided in potentially discovering deeper levels of intimacy. Those Christians struggling with sexual issues might find benefit by integrating more of a spiritual emphasis. Counsellors might also become more aware of the spiritual-sexual dialectic that can occur in the therapeutic relationship.

Rationale of the study

Clinicians should examine the possibilities of spiritual and sexual connection among Christians for several reasons. To begin, as Baker (1987) suggests, the role of a clinician inevitably involves sexual philosophy:

Some protest that when competent clinicians discuss sexual matters with their patients, they do so from a medical, therapeutic, or scientific perspective--they do not discuss these issues philosophically.... The point to be taken is that when sexual events conspire to force patients to engage their clinicians in discussions of sexual matters, the discussion necessarily evokes philosophies of sex, not because clinicians act in an unscientific or non-therapeutic manner, but rather because both science and therapy presuppose normative and philosophical commitments. (p. 88)

Baker argues that research and practice are invariably influenced by values and philosophy.

It is important for practitioners to formulate their values and philosophy towards sexuality. Whether clinicians are Christian or not, this involves processing their own

spiritual and sexual convictions and experiences. A 1992 Gallup poll indicated that a majority of those surveyed prefer a professional counsellor who represents spiritual values and beliefs integrated into the therapeutic process (Peteet, 1994). Reiss (1993) argues that the new postpositivist view of the meaning of science affords sexual science a more creative role and a more problem-resolving position in society. His emphasis is not on the impossible goal of being value free, but on the achievable goal of being value aware. All clients would be better served by clinicians who took this role seriously.

Although conservative Christians have traditionally been suspicious of religious experiences, and have tended to use rational positivism to explain them, experience does inform Christian theology and philosophy (Vande Kemp, 1996). Farnsworth (1996) states, "Personal experience can be helpful in understanding the truths in Scripture and justifying people's faith in the Bible's absolute authority in their lives" (p. 155). Discovering the descriptive themes of sexual and spiritual connection among Christians might lend interpretation and insight about the "mystery of one flesh" referred to by Paul in the New Testament. The outcomes of this study could inform a Christian theology on sexuality that would be useful for the Christian community.

Counsellors would also benefit by coming to grips with their own development in relating the sexual and the spiritual. The "person" of the therapist affects fundamental aspects of clinical practice. The therapist's differentiation is an important variable in his or her ability to maintain clinical neutrality, tolerate the intimacy of counselling relationships, and uphold clinical integrity. Though in distinct but parallel channels, spirituality and sexuality are separated by a wall thin enough for a strange osmosis to occur; the energies can get mixed up (MacKnee, 1997; May, 1982). Passion leading to spiritual fervour and the passion leading to sexual arousal stem from the same kind of physiological chemistry (Rosen & Beck, 1988).

The therapeutic relationship is emotionally charged and the bond between counsellor and client can be intense. Where in everyday life can persons be found who, for an agreed upon period of time, place their own needs and desires to one side and reliably be there to

listen and support others? It is little wonder that clients develop an idealising transference and may have problems in differentiating licit from illicit gratification (Modell, 1991).

Although the therapeutic relationship is asymmetrical, clients and therapists can veer from a spiritual (helpful and "healing") track to a sexual path if they fail to watch their steps.

Research demonstrates that unethical sexual encounters occur in pastoral counselling (Balswick & Thoburn, 1991) and professional counselling (Strean, 1993) relationships.

Understanding the nature of similarities and cross-roads between spirituality and sexuality might create awareness that could inhibit such problematic liaisons.

Exploring this topic is also important for counsellors because spirituality is a relevant topic in working with couples' sexual-marital difficulties (David & Duda, 1977; Schnarch, 1991). An interdisciplinary communication and collaboration to increase understanding of human sexuality is advocated by Coleman (1990). McCartney (1987), writing about sexual ethics, suggests religious leaders can contribute much with an approach that:

... looks not so much at sexual actions to determine their rightness or wrongness, but looks at human sexuality in the context of intimacy, spirituality, and interpersonal growth.... the energies of moral theologians in the church would be much better spent in discussing the importance of the relation of love and physical embodiment, human love as a symbol of divine love, the meaning of friendship and commitment, and the improvement of the quality of family life. (pp.223-224)

Connecting sexuality and spirituality in this context might be quite therapeutic for many in relationships.

Clinicians should also note that much sexual behaviour is rooted in social notions of morality. Engelhardt (1987) postulates that sexual philosophy and morality are conceptualised within two levels. One level involves "secular" concerns regarding autonomy, beneficence, and the keeping of promises; the other level involves "spiritual" matters like which promises should be made. He goes on to propose that spiritual morality relates to issues that may be unique to sexuality, including an understanding of the purpose

of sex and how life is meant to be. The results of this study could illuminate a Christian theology of sexuality for Christian adherents.

Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny (1986) observed that a rigid religious background in childhood is often associated with sexual dysfunctions. Within the Christian community there is evidence of much dualistic thinking which denigrates the physical and contributes to guilt and "dis-ease" regarding sexuality (Mayo, 1987; Smedes, 1994). Fear and inhibition among some Christian fundamentalists not only restricts their potential for sexual fullness (Stackhouse, 1996), it promotes legalism and promotes some (e.g., Bullough, 1987) to consider Christianity antisexual. Therapists who are sensitive to clients' religious beliefs enhance the likelihood of a successful treatment process (Simpson & Ramberg, 1992). Christian therapists working with Christian clients could combat the effects of dualism with the descriptive product of this study. Christian spiritual concepts such as self-disclosure, separateness versus unity, in God's image, coupleness, and letting go, can contribute to enhancing sexual functioning (David & Duda, 1977).

Finally, although education about sexuality is promoted and attempted in most Western high-school and college institutions, it is narrowly focused toward physiological understanding of sexuality (Hacker, 1990). At the same time, recent research in sexuality has been limited primarily to functional techniques and diverse ways of enhancing pleasure (Abrahamson, 1990; Sokol, 1986). There is a lack of research and instruction about ultimate meanings that may arise from sexual union (Smedes, 1994). Perhaps this is why people in the West, in spite of the sexual revolution, are confused and ambivalent about sex. Current society, simultaneously, has managed to be obsessed by and to trivialise sexuality. Sexual exhibitionism has taken center stage in many forms of advertising, literature, theater, and cinema.

Along with this "universal feverishness of sex" comes an implacable reserve about sex. Men and women in general are squeamish, timid, or offended about sexual relationships. Although people are surrounded by sex, sexual alienation abounds. Nelson (1983) proposes that there is sexual alienation:

from ourselves (bodies feel foreign or used as pleasure machines). It is alienation from others (we fear intimacy and vulnerability; we use sexuality in patterns of domination and submission). It is alienation from God (sexuality seems alien to "true spirituality"). (p. 6)

The need for more discernment and holistic education about sexuality is great. Cobliner (1988) points to evidence indicating that sexual involvement between college-aged partners of the opposite sex has been sporadic, episodic, without commitment, and accompanied by deliberate efforts by both partners to suppress tender, romantic feelings and intimacy. She believes restraint of affect leads to noticeable diminishment of gratification derived from sexual union, contributes to sexual apathy and discord, and gives rise to depersonalisation and derealization. The prevailing sexual conventions of young adults clash with fundamental urges to form human attachment, diminish sexual passion, and promote inner turmoil that weakens self-confidence. Cobliner, as well as Shaughnessy and Shakesby (1992) and Weinstein and Rosen (1991), advocate for correctives in education that include discussions of maturity, emotional intimacy, and more holistic understandings of sex.

This study was intended to offer more insight regarding sexuality and spirituality by providing mental health practitioners, researchers, sex educators, and church leaders with an initial understanding of themes describing the profound sexual and spiritual encounter among practising Christians. Eliciting information regarding how sexuality and spirituality are related in Western culture could provide professionals with further knowledge of human potential and intimacy. It could also promote dialogue and exchange that might diminish dualism and divisive thinking within the Christian community and between Christian and secular groups.

Approach to the Study

With the shifting landscape of sexual research (see Coleman, 1990 and Tiefer, 1991), qualitative methods seem most suited to explore how Christians have experienced a

profound sexual and spiritual encounter. Discovering the nature of this sexual and spiritual phenomenon entails more than examining physiological responses or test scores. These are dimensions of human experience rich in deep personal meaning. In this "post-modern period of sex research" (Simon, 1989), it is important to approach the study of sexuality by:

...understanding of its meaning; moving us from an arithmetic of behavior to a literacy of behavior. It requires that we place all sexual behavior in the larger context of the lives lived by those having these experiences. (p. 34)

Methodological Approach

In light of the fact that there has been no previous research exploring the qualities of sexual and spiritual experience among Christians and that this phenomenon transcends the objective realities typically studied by scientific psychology, this study incorporates an existential-phenomenological approach advocated by Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1975), Osborne (1990), and Polkinghorne (1989). The interview questions and conceptualization of the data in the form of a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, were informed by Cochran's (1990) phenomenological/narrative approach.

Existential-phenomenological research focuses on the inner world of individuals by accurately describing human experience and by attempting to understand that experience in terms of the structures that produce its meaning in consciousness (Polkinghorne, 1989). This approach is in contrast to empirical studies which focus on prediction, control, and measurement of observable data. Phenomenological research is essential because, according to Osborne (1994), "If psychology is to be existentially relevant it needs to address human experience in its fullness rather than that part of the experience which is compatible with prevailing methodological biases" (p. 168). Farnsworth (1990) affirms that the phenomenological approach is the "most effective and efficient method" for "understanding and validating religious experience" (p. 56) because religious experience is subjective in nature, involves both emotion and reason, and therefore, requires meaningful personal participation of the experiencer. More specific rationale for choosing an existential-

phenomenological approach, as well as a detailed description of the research design and methodology used in this study is presented in Chapter III.

In this study, practising Christians' descriptions of their sexual and spiritual experiences were elicited through in-depth phenomenological interviews. The interviews were then thoroughly analysed to draw out significant descriptive themes, constructed into a common structure or story, and checked for accuracy with the participants.

Definitions

Defining the complexities of sexuality and spirituality is a demanding task. Understandings of the concepts are either unclear or narrow. There is something about both experiences that mystifies, embarrasses, and allures. Religious writers tend to sanitise the text or barely scratch the surface. Golden opportunities for deeper appreciation of sexuality are evaded by relating spirituality almost exclusively to prayer, worship, and Christian service (Ammerman, 1990). On the other hand, secular society tends to liberate sexual standards while at the same time de-emphasise religious interpretations or references on the subject. People seem so preoccupied with the goal or product of spiritual and sexual experiences, they miss the richness of the process which connects these two related phenomena. Therefore a careful basis for discerning sexuality and spirituality must be constructed.

Sexuality

Cumulative research and systematic theoretical development are dependent upon precise definitions. But as Reiss (1986) concludes, an exact definition of sexuality is unavailable. It is common among the general population and researchers to have a narrow view of sexuality (Bruess & Greenberg, 1994). Prevailing conceptions of sexuality invoke descriptions of human sexual behavior which are mostly biological in focus (Reynolds, 1992). In current introductory psychology texts (e.g. Coon, 1992; Gleitman, 1991; Meyers, 1992) the sex drive is grouped with hunger and thirst and explicitly defined as having to do with bodily tension. Goettsch (1989) conceptualises sexuality as the individual capacity to

respond to physical experiences which are capable of producing body-centered genital excitation.

The above demarcations are limited to biological activity--only sex. According to Reynolds (1992), such definitions are characterised by a reductionism which precludes meaningfulness. Sexuality pervades all dimensions of individuals. The Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) offers a more complete explanation of sexuality:

Human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviours of individuals. It deals with the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; with roles, identity and personality; with individual thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and relationships. It addresses ethical, spiritual, and moral concerns, and group and cultural variations (Bruess & Greenberg, 1994, p. 4).

Although the SIECUS definition is a broader understanding of sexuality, its focus is limited to the individual. Such renderings of sexuality are characterised by an individualism which precludes genuine intimacy (Reynolds, 1992). By themselves biological and individualistic understandings of sexuality offer a somewhat barren account of what is otherwise a richly meaningful human experience.

When examined reflectively and viewed in dimensions which include but transcend the biological and the individual, sex becomes sexuality (Freeman, 1989). Human beings are sexual creatures. An essence of humanity is to be either male or female. Gender differences signify more than the physical features that allow for procreation. Sexuality refers to our total existence as male or female (Grenz, 1991; Nelson, 1983; Schnarch, 1991). It is our way of being in the world and relating to the world as male and female. At its core, this embodied existence includes a fundamental incompleteness.

Sexuality calls males and females to move toward completeness--to form unity or wholeness that is experienced as intimacy (Gallagher, 1985; Moore, 1994; Reiss, 1986; Welwood, 1990). Physical bodiliness involves human interaction, for the body is the

vehicle through which the human need for communication and communion is met (Hughes, 1981; Schnarch, 1991). Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is conveyed through means of the body; communion finds a primary expression and experience in physical touch (Master & Johnson, 1976; Salisbury, 1990).

Sexuality entails body function, but it pervades human experience. Sexuality involves the realm of the psyche--emotions, dreams, hopes, expectations, fears, memories, and affective self-concept (Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985; Nelson, 1983). The psychological dimension of sexuality is expressed in the capacity to be deeply aroused by what humans experience (Penner & Penner, 1981; Schnarch, 1991). It represents the availability of one's whole being to respond (or risk responding) as felt, understood, known, or desired (Dychtwald, 1979; Reiss, 1986; Schnarch, 1991). The psyche can join a physical sense of oneness with self and others, culminating in orgasm and an "altered state of consciousness that is characterised by absolute focus upon the moment and feelings of ecstasy, peace, and contentment" (Anderson & Morgan, 1994, p. 117).

Knowing oneself as a sexual person requires that one is known by others. Reiss (1986) describes a major component of sexuality in terms of "self-disclosure," or "making known to another something previously unknown" (p. 33). "Knowing" is the term used to indicate sexual intercourse in the King James version of the Old Testament scriptures. If one is attracted to another, there is chosen value. If one is open and honest with another there is vulnerability and truth. Love, value and truth are spiritual realities (Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985). This depth of involvement characterises mature sexual relationships (Mosher, 1980).

Freud (1955) and Erikson (1950) propose that in order to realise one's true sexual uniqueness one must know and be known by one's gender opposite. According to Moore (1980), the feminine stereotypically implies the creation and nurture of life and the masculine stereotypically implies self-realisation, the drive for individual expression, and personal immortality. As these elements are integrated in the union of sexual male and female, wholeness and communion, and even transcendence are potentially experienced

(Mosher, 1980; Schnarch, 1991). Such intimacy, if it truly reveals who people are and truly eases their aloneness, is not limited to the human dimension.

The above discussion serves to demonstrate the complexity and multi-dimensional character of sexuality. Keeping in mind the explanatory comments with regards to this subject, this research recognises the need for a more succinct yet meaningfully comprehensive definition. It is proposed that Nelson's (1983) summary definition of sexuality is most appropriate for this study. Nelson suggests sexuality "is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion, both creaturely and divine" (p. 6). This interpretation includes individuality, gender, relational intimacy, and the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human sexuality.

Spirituality

Human spirituality is no less difficult to define than human sexuality. Spirituality has been culturally and rigidly understood as the province of clergy preoccupied with heavenly salvation rather than earthly delight. However, contemporary society (Jones, 1993; Taylor, 1994), psychological researchers (e.g. Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, Saunders, 1988; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, Benson, 1991), and practitioners (Aldridge, 1993; Ingersoll, 1994; Vaughan, 1994) demonstrate increasing awareness and interest in spiritual experience. Maslow (1970) was not impressed by traditional, organised religion, but was very concerned with genuine spiritual values. He believed that such values had naturalistic meaning that could be studied scientifically for the usefulness of all humanity.

Elkins et al. (1988) formulated the following definition of naturalistic spirituality: Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, *spiritus*, meaning "breath of life," is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterised by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate. (p. 10)

These researchers go on to identify nine major components of this construct which include: transcendent dimension, meaning and purpose in life, mission in life, sacredness of life,

material values, altruism, idealism, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality (e.g. connection with self, others, and "God").

Ingersoll's (1994) model of spirituality consists of seven complementary dimensions similar to those of Elkins et al. (1988). Ingersoll's spiritual dimensions include: meaning (going beyond oneself and seeing life as worth living), conception of divinity, relationship or interconnectedness, mystery (ineffable sacredness), play ("natural ecstasies" such as joyful sex), experience (authenticity, peak moments), and integration of life. Vaughan (1994) proposes that mature spirituality is based on the dynamic interconnection of courage, risk, relinquishment, forgiveness, love, valuing of self and others, and commitment to truth, authenticity, and responsibility. The definitions and corresponding components of spirituality cited above allow viewing spiritual experience as belonging to humanity--with or without religious practices.

Helminiak (1989) writes that spiritual development is nothing other than human development viewed from the perspective in which it becomes the ongoing integration of the person that results from openness to an intrinsic principle of authentic self-transcendence. He goes on to suggest that when spirituality is conceptualised as the integration of all aspects of the person and the actualization of one's fullest potential, the role of sexuality in one's spiritual development becomes obvious.

Christian spirituality emphasises the Christian's intimate relationship with God. Maturity or wholeness progresses as one becomes more closely connected with the Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Benner, 1988). According to Gillett (1993), wholeness is somewhat equated with holiness that is "dependent on the closest of unions between Christ and the individual" (p. 95). True Christian spirituality, from Hurding's (1995) perspective, "emphasises the living out of commitment to God in every area of life" (p. 294) and is characterised by an openness to the Holy Spirit's influence, a readiness to worship God, and a profound pledge to love and care for "one another."

Part of the basic structure of spirituality is a relationship between an experiencing subject and a reality which transcends sense phenomena (Johnson, 1989). The effect of this

encounter on the experiencing subject is a heightened or expanded awareness--a deepened awareness of self, others, and world (Freeman, 1988; Johnson 1989). Spirituality includes, "... the whole style and meaning of our relationship to that which we perceive as of ultimate worth and power" (Nelson, 1983, p. 5). If humans take seriously their enfleshment, then their spirituality in this life is to be worked out in the body and in the world. If humans take seriously their soul, then they need to approach spirituality in such a way as to recognise that life is also preparation for what transcends it.

Spirituality is a core dimension of humanity that seeks to understand the more mysterious aspects of life, to discover personal meaning, and to experience relatedness to the ultimate. Spirituality, like sexuality, offers a way to become intimate or connected with others, with the transcendent, and with one's authentic self.

Practising Christian

The participants in this study were those individuals who identified themselves as practising Christians. Although many in Western society might subscribe to Christian values and title, practising Christians were defined as persons who believed in and worshipped the God of the Bible and attended a Christian church. The Christian church criterion was defined as any church (e.g. Protestant or Catholic) listed in Derksen's (1996) British Columbia Christian Resource Directory 1996/97.

Profound Sexual and Spiritual Encounter

Recognising that there are various understandings and degrees of involvement within sexual and spiritual intimacy, this study included practising Christians who had experienced sexual and spiritual arousal simultaneously. Defining this encounter more specifically, sexual arousal and orgasm was experienced concurrently with the presence of God.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter attempts to furnish a cultural and historical foundation for relating sexuality and spirituality. Review of the literature reveals that sexuality and spirituality have common origins and that their energy flows are similarly experienced. Psychological conjectures on love, theoretical perspectives of transpersonal psychology's mystical peak experience, and a Christian theology of sexuality will provide groundwork for perceiving spiritual and sexual connection. Finally, specific research that endeavors to explore and facilitate the relationship between sexuality and spirituality will be discussed.

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Regardless of which religion, culture, or period of history, the relationship between spirituality and sexuality has been a topic of discussion (Murray, 1991). To understand the present, it is helpful to examine the past. This overview is informed by the following authors: Ammerman (1990), Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak (1985), Coll (1989), Francoeur (1992), Fuchs (1983), Gordis (1977), Tannahill (1980), and Schnarch (1991). Depending upon which time-frame or perspective this subject is viewed, negative or positive postures prevail. This section explores both.

Negative attitudes.

Western civilization has generally opposed the integration of sexuality and spirituality. The origins of this negative attitude can be found in the interaction of the Jewish, Greek, and Christian traditions, which helped form this culture.

In Judaic tradition sex is the creation of God and it is good (Gordis, 1977). Hebrew scriptures include two garden stories that illustrate a holistic position toward sexuality. Both gardens, in Genesis (Eden) and the Song of Songs, present human sexuality as a gift from God to be enjoyed apart from procreation considerations. Gordis believes there was no distinction between physical and spiritual love. When sin entered human experience in Eden's garden, a sense of shame caused humankind to cover its nakedness. The Christian church has tended to relate sin with sexuality from that part of the story. However, the source of shame was the total vulnerability that is present in nakedness and in the startling revelation that they were capable of hurting each other (Hart, 1984; White, 1993). Covering the body indicates the centrality of sexuality in the core of personhood.

One of the functions of sex was to propagate God's chosen people--the children of Israel. To keep Israel's religion pure, the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus proscribed sexual practices associated with pagan rites. The Hebrews were invading Canaan, a land where the Philistine inhabitants believed in Ashteroth--the goddess of fertility. "Sacred women" or temple prostitutes were integral to the temple ceremony. In Canaanite religion they fostered fertility and serviced male worshippers. The Old Testament Law equates idolatry, the worst of all sins against Yahweh, with sexual infidelity and promiscuity. An example is the coupling of idolatry and harlotry in Ezekial 16:1-49. Therefore rules regarding sexual conduct were established for the Jews; however, this culture viewed the body and sexuality as affirming and as created for mutual celebration.

From the Jews, Christianity inherited a basically positive attitude toward sexuality. Unfortunately that attitude was further influenced by Hellenistic thought. Early Greeks believed that sexual abstinence was a requisite for sublime purity. Stoic philosophy defined

reality as dual, consisting of two opposite and irreconcilable elements. What was good was of the spirit; what was evil was of the body. Dualistic thinking was especially evident in the Gnostic and Manichean "heresies," which taught that a good and loving God created the spiritual world and an evil demi-god created the material one. The desires and passions of the flesh or material body were considered to be carnal. That which was of the spirit was eternal and good. Hellenistic "heresies" promoted the belief that sex was anathema.

As a result of Gnostic and Manichean influences, Christian theologians (primarily Irenaeus and Tertullian) began to advance an exaggerated asceticism which disfavored marriage and sex. These practices were in no way taught by Hebraic or New Testament scriptures. With the moral theology of Augustine, a Manichean in his youth, sexuality was directly related to sin and considered antispiritual. Augustine's impact on Western Christianity is profound.

By the Middle Ages, sexual abstinence and virginity were declared to be superior to marriage. The doctrine of "original sin" (sin transmitted via sexuality) was well-established. Sex was only countenanced as a means of procreation. Increased devotion to the humanity of Jesus idealized body-denying asceticism. Thomas Aquinas applied sacramental grace to conjugal love. During this time there was negation of bodily pleasure, demeaning of women (seen as sexual and incomplete), and rigorous control of sexuality exercised by the celibate clergy.

With the sixteenth century Reformation, led by Martin Luther, there was a return to the Bible as the authority. Not surprisingly, there was a reestablishment of Hebraic sexual pleasure. The ecclesiastical requirement of celibacy and the concept of marriage as a sacrament was rejected.

Subsequently, sexual attitudes have undergone numerous fluctuations. For example, during the Victorian period the general belief was that sexual activity and even sexual impulses were a moral threat to be held in suspicion. However, it is clear that current Western conflicts between sexuality and spirituality are reflections of Hebraic/Hellenistic dualism. The consequences of dualistic thinking are the depreciation of sex (the body is evil or objectified and alienated) and the demeaning of male and female gender (see Cole, 1989 for explication of the effects on gender). Although Western Christianity is promoting more holistic and affirming views on sexuality, contemporary culture has difficulty shaking its heritage.

Positive attitudes

Many religions (especially Eastern) have viewed sexuality as integral to spiritual pursuit (Chevez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985). Sex is connected with religious ritual for attaining enlightenment; sexual gods and goddesses permeate historical spirituality (Francoeur, 1992; Sokol, 1986). Both ascetic and Tantric disciplines, the first directed to sexual denial, the second to sexual indulgence, developed in order to promote spiritual connectedness (Anderson & Morgan, 1994).

Mystics have traditionally expressed their experience in the language of sexual love. Although they are often misunderstood or simply not understood, they, "are each a human countenance in which we can recognize something of ourselves--each is a portrait for self-recognition" (O'Connor, 1987, p. 9). Early pious Christians such as Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Teresa of Avilia were classic mystics who used language that attempted to convey the rapture, intimacy, and ecstasy of their experience of the divine.

Teresa of Avilia provides a graphic example of such encounters with God. In her book The Interior Castle, she describes a vision of the "consummation of spiritual nuptials" with Christ:

I saw a long spear in his hand and there seemed to be a little flame at the tip of it. This he seemed to plunge into my heart repeatedly, until it reached my very entrails. When he drew it out ... it left me utterly afire with a great love for God. The pain was so great that it made me moan over and over, and the sweet delight into which that pain threw me was so intense that one could not want it to stop, or the soul be contented with anything but God. (Whalen, 1984, p. 188).

The intertwining of spirituality and sexuality find expression in the erotic poetry of the mystics (Colman, 1994). Colman points to the ability of John Donne, an Anglican priest and poet who celebrated spirituality and sexuality together by asking God to "ravage and rape" him. Another example is the famous "Dark Night" poem of Saint John of the Cross. He begins with "One dark night, fired with love's urgent longings..." and culminates with:

I abandoned and forgot myself,
 laying my face on my Beloved;
 all things ceased; I sent out from myself,
 leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

Peck (1994) believes this final stanza of the poem, describing the mystical union possible between human beings and God, is a beautiful description of human orgasm.

The Jewish prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and especially Hosea, used the language and imagery of sexual relationship, intimacy and intercourse to describe the powerful union between God and his people. Paul, in the New Testament letters relates the "mysterious"

union between a husband and wife to the bond between Christ and his church. Although Sokol (1986) interprets this to mean Paul lacks understanding regarding "one flesh" mystery, this reference could also be understood as Paul experiencing wonder and awe as he contemplates this union. Perhaps he is referring to a remnant of "pre-fall depth" of union that might be possible in moments of ecstatic and blissful spiritual and sexual connection. More of a Biblical perspective on sexuality will be covered later in the section entitled "A Christian Theology of Sexuality."

The linking of spirituality and sexuality has appeared in historical culture in other ways. In the courts of medieval Europe, "courtly love" relationships were the ideal (Tannahill, 1980). Courtly love introduced a code of acceptable behavior in which noblewomen were elevated by knights to an immaculate plane and romanticism, secrecy, and valor were celebrated in song, poetry, and gallantries. Pure love was seen as incompatible with the temptations of the flesh, and periodically this was tested when naked lovers lay together in bed and proved the fullness of their love by refraining from sexual intercourse. Sexual feelings were transformed into dedicated service. Supposedly, such restraint and devotion spiritually elevated the knights.

Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Taoism, steeped in millennia of culture, "celebrate the naturalness of sexual pleasure and the spiritual potential of sexual relations" (Francoer, 1992, p. 10). Sexual union becomes the way to commune with another and with the gods. The spirituality of erotic love is taught and experienced in Tantric rites and sexual yoga. Participants learn breathing exercises, relaxation, elaborate foreplay behaviors, and how to delay climax. Males discover the difference between orgasm and ejaculation. The climax, built stage by stage in exquisite communion, brings on physical and spiritual

ecstasy. Those involved claim to attain higher states of consciousness in which personal ego is transcended and there is fusion of two into oneness (Francoer, 1992; Sokol, 1986; Veereshwar, 1979). Ecstatic pleasure, profound contentment, and even physical healing are said to be experienced by Tantric practitioners (Neff, 1981).

History also provides an example of a highly positive connection between sexuality and spirituality by a Western "Christian" community. The Oneida Colony, founded by John Humphrey Noyes in Pennsylvania in 1837, practiced a type of spiritual sexuality (Foster, 1985). Noyes spoke of the "subordination of the flesh to the spirit, teaching men to seek principally the elevated spiritual pleasures of sexual intercourse" (p. 95). Although the original purpose was to avoid unwanted pregnancy, men were taught techniques of non-orgasmic copulation which also enhanced women's enjoyment of sex. Desiring "ultimate union", the Oneida men and women discovered Noyes' recommendations for sexual relations induced a relaxation and mutual devotion far surpassing that of ordinary sex. Sex was a spiritually elevating experience.

Historically, meaning has been ascribed to sexuality by making it sacred (Ammerman, 1990). Acknowledging that sexuality participated in the creative work of God, enables one to mark the beginning of a theological approach to sexuality (Fuchs, 1983). Sexuality could be seen as a gift from God (Penner & Penner, 1981). Sexuality is a mystery which pervades all of human life. In that life is sacred, sexuality could also be sacred. The chronicles of religion and culture attest to the dialectic between sexuality and spirituality.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR CONNECTING SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Common Origins

Although sexuality can be understood as pervading all of life, Carl Jung (1933) pointed to inherited elements in the human psyche which are sexual and serve to help integrate each person. Jung identified the masculine archetype that inhabited the psyche of the female--the animus, and the female archetype that inhabited the male--the anima. "Ani", the Latin word for spirit, was made masculine or feminine by the ending (Freeman, 1988). Jung describes the second stage of human development as the process of "individuation." When other developmental tasks are completed (around mid-life), one can integrate the conscious with the unconscious and become whole. Discovering and linking one's opposite unconscious sexual element with one's real embodied gender is part of this "spiritual journey."

According to Jung (1933), archetypes are structures of the psyche imprinted through the experience of human existence that were symbols preserved in myths. Among the myths of Greeks, as retold by Plato, is a story that explains human origins (Colman, 1994; Peck, 1993). This myth tells us that original humans were androgynous, unified wholes. As punishment for their pride and their attempt to encroach upon the gods, they were split into two halves--male and female. Now individuals were incomplete, no longer capable of competing with the gods, but forever searching for union with their complements. Plato's myth complements the etiology of the word "sex" derived from the Latin verb "secare," which means "to cut" (David & Duda, 1977). Hence the term--"the other half."

Those familiar with the accounts of human experience recorded in the Bible will recall this theme. In the beginning (Genesis 2) the two genders were joined in one, albeit lonely, physical body. To meet Adam's need for human intimacy, God surgically operated to separate him into two distinct, yet complementary, humans. It is the male and female together, unified in "one flesh" sexuality, who manifest the image of God in a more profound sense than either of them standing alone (Dalbey, 1988).

So according to Plato's myth and the Genesis account, humans are incomplete, yearning for wholeness, hoping that in the moment of sexual union they might re-experience at least a portion of the lost ecstasy of their near godlike totality. The ancient Romans had a gloomy proverb: "Post coitus omnis animal triste." The translation is, "Every creature is sad following sexual intercourse." In the vastness of the universe, a temporary attempt at closeness has been made. When the two halves are joined together, the man and the woman regain the wholeness they desire.

What are the roots of spirituality? As discussed earlier, spirituality is identified by the experience of and yearning for meaning, purpose, "something more" or transcendent, and for connection (Elkins et al., 1988; Ingersoll; 1994; Vaughan, 1991). This seeking aspect of human experience is an attempt to fill that "existential vacuum." Spirituality is an "urge toward wholeness" (Moberg, 1990), that is a response to human incompleteness.

The "something more" which is needed to provide wholeness is perceived by many to be truth (Ammerman, 1990; Carnes, 1988; Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985; Freeman, 1988; Johnson, 1989; Ingersoll, 1994; Vaughan, 1991). A theist perspective would see the human concern for truth as the tendency toward the fullness of truth--God. Whether theist or not, to discover the "truth" requires much soul-searching, self-discovery, and honesty.

Bilotta (1981) states, "Spirituality is an inward journey of self-knowledge" (p. 13). It is the desire "to know" (sexual symbolism is evident here) that motivates human will. This kind of road towards completeness is tantamount to the definitions and experience of sexuality as discussed above.

The context for spiritual and sexual urges to wholeness is community. Although one can experience sexual release in an auto-erotic way, communion or "connecting" with another is necessary to experience wholeness in sex (Welwood, 1990; Schnarch, 1991). Communion is necessary for spirituality as well (Anderson & Morgan, 1994; Nelson, 1981). Connecting with reality and "the other" is fulfilling the spirit. Like the empowering, truthful communion witnessed in self-help groups, spiritual people are committed to honesty and finding meaning in suffering--even in facing the pain of sexual compulsions and difficulties (Carnes, 1987; 1994).

Jungian psychology continues to provide insight for a common rootedness of sexuality and spirituality. The anima and the animus represent contra-sexual parts of our psyche which need to be related to discover human wholeness (maturity). If one takes the first chapter of Genesis seriously, humans are made in the image of God--male and female. That which is expressed in both maleness and femaleness are parts of God. Therefore the exploration of human wholeness is in a way an exploration of God (Freeman, 1988).

The common origins of sexuality and spirituality lie in the human experience of incompleteness. As these feelings are owned and as self-discovery takes place, humans awaken the desires to transcend self and enter into union with others and with "ultimate reality."

Similarity of Energy Flow

The notion of psychic energy has been proposed by a number of theorists including Freud and Jung. In his third chapter entitled, "Sexual Potential: Actualization of Eroticism and Intimacy," Schnarch (1991) discusses a number of theories and studies related to the subjective nature of stimuli and arousal responses of people. Some researchers (Hatfield & Rapson, 1987; Kaplan, 1979; Liebowitz, 1983) have tried to explain and measure passionate arousal physiologically; currently more interest is on the subjective experience of the person (Schnarch). The arousing nature of psychic energy relates the sexual to the spiritual.

Feuerstein (1989) proposes that if people want to grow spiritually, they must integrate their sexual urges into their spiritual needs. Sex, according to him, can be a means to and an expression of spiritual enlightenment. Moore (1985) cites the experience of a "sudden sense of desire for no specific object at all" as the hallmark of elevated spirituality (p. 80). May (1982) believes that if human passion for the divine is allowed into awareness, it is bound to have sexual effects. He has found that it is common for genital excitation and even orgasm to occur during prayer and meditation. These mysterious experiences can be illustrated by phenomenological cases.

Nelson (1981) recounts a wondrous experience he had during a midnight eucharistic service on one Christmas eve. He found himself moved by wonder, desire, and longing. He was reaching toward fulfillment in his God, when he felt the physical sensations of sexual arousal. In a similar vein, Schnarch (1991) describes a visit to a Hindu temple in India. Along with the other visitors, he discovered being highly aroused "for nothing or anyone in particular" (p.549) In the context of intense spirituality they experienced desire without object. Could the sexual and spiritual urges be merged?

If one reviews American church history, the "tent meeting" was instrumental in evangelizing the frontier. These emotionally pitched events, combined with a fairly unrefined crowd, heightened passions for urges other than piety. Meeting organizers had to patrol the tents and bushes to keep illicit liaisons to a minimum. Shelley (1988) remarks that, "one observer cynically suggested that at some of the more boisterous camp meetings, 'more souls were conceived than converted'" (p. 3). I have a friend who is a chaplain at San Quentin maximum security prison north of San Francisco. He informed me that when inmates are released, many proceed to churches (especially charismatic ones) to find a female sexual partner. The passion experienced with the "spiritually heightened" women is "out of this world."

Margaret Evening (1974), a missionary teacher, records, "the strange phenomenon, observed by missionaries, of a higher incidence of sexual immorality following a religious revival" (p. 39). She goes on to observe, "Fervent prayer often heightens our awareness and longing for love in all directions and not only Godwards ... Prayer not only expresses love but engenders it too" (p. 40). These statements remind me of a situation at a college where I used to teach. Student services decided to close the "prayer room" because male and female students would enter together to pray and leave with sexual guilt.

Could it be that the sexual and spiritual components of human psyche lie so close together that it is difficult to arouse one without arousing the other? Peck (1993) relates stories of clients who have spiritual conversion experiences and become orgasmic for the first time in their lives. He suggests giving oneself wholeheartedly to "God" enables one to give oneself wholeheartedly to another human.

It is little wonder that ministers and counsellors who establish supportive, intimate

counselling relationships with clients at times get involved in emotional and physical entanglements (see Balswick & Thoburn, 1991; Streat, 1993). Spiritual seekers (those who pursue meaning and connection) can have episodes in which they invest erotic needs in God and seek to satisfy spiritual needs through erotic interpersonal relationships. In therapist-client sexual relationships, often one is starved for love and in the confusion erotic love masquerades as spiritual longing (May, 1982). What began as a "spiritual" relationship developed into a sexual expression.

Though in distinct but parallel channels, spirituality and sexuality are separated by a wall thin enough for a strange osmosis to occur; the energies get mixed up. Eastern religious views of mind-body unity seem to concur. Moore (1980) gives a Vedic (ancient East Indian) interpretation. The two experiences of sexuality and spirituality represent two aspects of total energy-flow experienced by human beings. Sexuality is the desire for pleasure, information, and longevity; spirituality is the desire for lasting happiness, true knowledge, and immortality. The perceived similarities are striking.

Researchers who have studied the neurochemical processes in the human brain have noted that the passion leading to spiritual fervor and the passion leading to sexual activity stem from the same kind of physiological chemistry (Rosen & Beck, 1988). Sargant (1957) describes this phenomenon as "transmarginal inhibition;" when one experiences spiritual highs, emotional vulnerability is prevalent. If the primitive reward centers of the brain are not differentiated neurologically, various stimuli could produce the same kind of neurological high. When someone has an intense spiritual experience, it can trigger sexual arousal and even orgasmic responses.

May (1982), a psychiatrist who has explored neurological activity that correlates

with mystical experience, refers to this as "energy-transmutation." He explains this by stating:

The notion of energy-transmutation allows us to understand how sexuality and spirituality are related at a level far more deep than can be ascertained even by their striking symbolic and experiential similarities. From the standpoint of human contemplative experience, sexual and spiritual phenomena do indeed seem to originate from the common energy source of all experience--the basic life-force that we have chosen to call spirit (p. 190).

Repression of these energies leads to another interesting connection between spirituality and sexuality. May (1982) continues by writing:

If people repress or stifle sexuality out of fear or guilt--even in the guise of trying to be holy--they will most likely also repress and stifle other expressions of creative living energy and wind up feeling and being only partially involved in the process of life....Likewise, spirituality can also be stifled and repressed and often has been in recent generations in our culture (p. 191).

Repression of one of these life energies leads to the repression of the other energy. Harron (1981) suggests that stifling human potential inhibits contact with "the gods" or the spiritual domain as well as inhibiting sexual expression and love. Her discussion points to the inability to "let go" and abandon oneself (which is necessary in both spirituality and sexuality) if one blocks spiritual or sexual energy.

Sexual and spiritual energies can be confused in another way. Although the issue of whether sex can be an addiction is debatable (see Carnes, 1994; Klein, 1994), Carnes (1987) proposes that those who struggle with sexual behaviors deny the "shadow" elements in their

lives (p. 173) When they see themselves unable to control their sexual behaviors, they become more alienated and endeavor to keep their behavior secret. Hiding within religious institutions or creating a facade of morality are attempts to cover their shame. Carnes believes that the road to recovery is a spiritual process. This includes acknowledging and facing their "demons" by finding connection or communion with others and a "higher power." Embracing the "truth" about their problems adds much understanding and depth (meaning) to their spiritual growth.

In a similar vein, counsellor and priest Henri Nouwen (1988), writes that sexuality is personal or private and communal. He states, "If I keep my sexual life a hidden life (just for myself), it will gradually be split off from the rest of my life and become a dangerous force" (p. 169). His belief is that there is no real distinction between the private and public spheres of life and, "The mental and spiritual health of a community depends largely on the way its members live their most personal lives as a service to their fellow human beings" (p. 169). Therefore, he suggests that confession of one's private life (sexual) and personal accountability within the context of community (spiritual) leads one to wholeness. In Nouwen's view, connecting sexual and spiritual energies enables one to be of more service to others.

Theories of Love Relating Sexuality and Spirituality

Love and sex are great mysteries in life that resist the many human attempts to explain and control them (Moore, 1994). Sometimes, for example, when sex is repressed, the human mind becomes obsessed with it; if the body becomes puritanical, the mind becomes hedonistic. Veereshwar (1979) suggests that love and sex are mysterious because

both experiences are steeped in the fear of losing self-control. "Letting go" in sex and love is similar to surrendering or relinquishing oneself to a "higher power" or God. Losing control of self in the experiences of sex, love, and spirituality is possibly why these dimensions of life are so misunderstood, easily confused, and yet can merge into a holistic schema of human functioning.

To gain more understanding regarding the relationship among love, sex, and spirituality, some conceptualizations of love will be explored. Sternberg (1988) proposed an elaborate typology of love that included three different components--passion, intimacy, and commitment. He defines these elements of love this way:

Passion encompasses the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation;

Intimacy encompasses the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness one experiences in loving relationships; and

A decision/commitment encompasses, in the short term, the decision that one loves another, and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love. (p. 32)

Sternberg argued that different kinds of love differ in how much passion, intimacy, or commitment they possess. Passionate love (or infatuation) involves intense passionate arousal but little intimacy or commitment. Companionate love involves less passion and far more intimacy and commitment. The most complete form of love is consummate love, which requires equal doses of passion, intimacy, and commitment. This current study of sexuality and spirituality focuses on the passionate or physical and the intimate or emotional components of Sternberg's model of love.

Passionate Love--Eros

Hatfield and Rapson (1993) focus their research on the passionate aspect of love.

They define passionate love as:

A state of intense longing for union with another....Reciprocated love (union with the other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy: unrequited love (separation) with emptiness, anxiety, or despair. (p. 5)

Hatfield and Rapson (1987) believe that the paradigm for explaining passionate love also explains sexual desire. They propose that excitement aroused by the interplay between security and anxiety creates the tension needed for both sex and passion. Pointing to research that suggests passionate love is rooted in low self-esteem, dependency and insecurity, anxiety, and neediness, Hatfield and Rapson (1993) balance this immature picture of love by painting the beautiful potential of passion that includes: moments of exultation, feelings of being understood and accepted, sharing a sense of union, feelings of security, and experiences of transcendence. Drawing from Hatfield and Rapson's perspective on the potential of passion, it could be proposed that letting go of self-control propels humans toward passion in spiritual realms.

"*Eros*," a Greek word that means love, is often understood as the passionate aspect of love and sexuality (Hart, 1984). Rollo May (1969), defining the term from a historical Greek perspective, refers to *eros* as "the spirit of life" and the "creative force." Similar to Freudian understanding of *eros*, Gerald May (1982) explains *eros* as "the energy drive toward creation, growth, and fullness of life" (p. 190). Smedes (1978) says that "*Eros* is desire" (p. 3) and that erotic love "is the driving power for personal growth. All creativity rises from the need-power of *eros*. *Eros* is a drive created by human need for a share in

what is beautiful" (pp. 120-121).

The definitions of *eros* suggest that *eros* is an essential element of life. It is part of humanity's basic life-force that could be also referred to as "spirit" (Colman, 1994; May, 1982). Sexuality is an essence of human existence, but the erotic spirit could be likened to a divine visitation. Colman reminds us that the ancient Greeks believed the experience of romantic passion was a visitation by the god, *Eros*. Rollo May (1969) also writes of *eros* as a daimonic or an energetic god. Colman suggests that erotic passion seeks sexual consummation but is not extinguished by it; instead, it may be intensified. Perhaps no physical realization is sufficient to meet the aim of *eros*, which could be why it is so creative (e.g. poetry and song) and imaginative. It is proposed by Colman that erotic love transforms sexuality into spirituality.

Characteristics that differentiate sex and *eros* are provided by Rollo May (1969). I have juxtaposed his distinctions between *eros* and sex as follows:

<i>EROS</i>	SEX
-psychological, spiritual	-biological
-meaning, intentionality	-stimulus and response
-creates excitement, desire,	-reduces tension and
-tension, longing, yearning	-creates gratification,
for more (wholeness)	relaxation
-union, relationship,	-self-centered
integration	
-"making love"	-manipulation of sex
transforming, imaginative	organs
-attracts, pulls, allures,	-pushes, need for relief
entices, invites	
-drive toward passion, depth	-push toward orgasm,
growth	pleasure, release
-creative	-end in itself
-focus on beginning,	-focus on end,
continuation	culmination

May continues to describe *eros* as the power which drives humans toward God. "*Eros* is the yearning for mystical union which comes out in the religious experience of union with God, or in Freud's 'oceanic' experience" (p. 79). The binding function of *eros* fits well with the

original meaning of the word religion (re-ligio), which means binding together and "reconnection."

The origin of erotic love from psychoanalytic understanding is seen as a form of regression to earlier infantile states (Ireland, 1988). Psychoanalytic theorists propose love is rooted in either the incestuous longings of the Oedipus complex or the states of primary union believed to occur in the early mother/infant relationship. Jung (1926) suggests that the return to the original condition of unconscious oneness is like a return to childhood or even to the mother's womb. The "oneness" of the child with the mother is linked to the "oneness" of two lovers. According to Mahler (1968), just as a mother is able to enter into the child's emotional and physical state so to lovers are able to put their egos aside and join the emotional and physical state of the other. It is possible to see this repetition of the original love affair between a mother and her baby in popular songs and expressions between lovers--a pet word for lover is "baby." Freud (1955) equates this state of being in love to a hypnotic trance, noting that there is the same humble subjection, the same compliance, the same absence of criticism and the same sapping of initiative towards the hypnotist as towards the beloved. He refers to this dissolution of boundaries and defenses as the "oceanic state"--a mystical experience of union. Falling in love can create the sense that the lost paradise can be, at least temporarily, found again.

A requirement of development is that the child comes to terms with separation and the loss of the original union and mature to integrate sexual and affectionate feelings by directing them toward an unique other outside the family (Freud, 1955; Mahler, 1968). There are longings to be joined or to be reunited. Talley (1980) explains, "Mother alone could no longer satisfy, since we have become aware of her limits as we have become aware of our own limits" (p. 99). He goes on to suggest that this awareness of human limits provides much of the impetus in the compelling passion for love and reunion with the Ultimate.

Attachment theory seems to concur with psychoanalytic interpretations. Research by Bowlby (1988) demonstrates that infants require a deep emotional bond with their parents

(especially mother), based on love and sensitivity to their needs, to facilitate development. He suggests that securely attached infants--those that experience an active, affectionate, reciprocal relationship with parents and are able to separate from parents as long as they can return for reassurance--are more able to engage in independent exploration and gain positive relationships with peers. Ainsworth (1989) found that mothers and infants may form different kinds of attachments. Besides secure attachments, attachments that are anxious/ambivalent and anxious/avoidant can ensue. The anxiety based attachments occur due to the unpredictable nature of mothers whose behaviors range from overprotecting to ignoring their infants. Hindy, Schwarz, and Brodsky (1989) tested the effects of early attachment on adult love relationships. They discovered that young adults whose parents had been inconsistent in their love and nurturance were either more "addicted" to love or they were more afraid of it than was the case with those who came from more secure backgrounds. Relationships built only on passion run the risk of being immature, addictive, and wrought with anxiety (Nelson, Hill-Barlow, & Benedict, 1994).

Erotic love can lead to spiritual communion, yet there is potential for confusion and illusion. Freud (1955) believes that love is an irrational phenomenon verging on the abnormal. Wishful thinking and idealization of the lover enhances love. Nygren (1983) writes "*Eros* is an appetite, a yearning desire which is aroused by the attractive qualities of its object" (p. viii). Because humans fear giving up control, there is an uncanny capacity for selfish exploitation of others. Jersild and Johnson (cited in Grenz, 1990, p. 34) put it this way:

As sexual beings we are capable of establishing beautiful relationships of mutual dependence and respect, but we are also capable of reducing another person to an extension of ourselves, creating excessive dependence because we need to control. It is precisely as sexual beings that we are most vulnerable to the desire to possess another person and to reduce him or her to the object of our desire.

Peck (1993) refers to this as the "illusion of romantic love." With the longing to overcome separateness, humans can look to their lover or spouse to be a god for them. The lover is to

meet all one's needs and to give a person lasting happiness, but eternal bliss does not happen because this is an endeavor to objectify something transcendent (God and ultimate truth).

On the other hand, Gerald May (1982) warns that because the raw energy of passionate sexuality can be compelling and overwhelming, one must be careful not to channel all one's sexual energy into spiritual expression. This leads to confusion because then humans could establish a very human love affair with God. When this occurs one would not be loving God but loving one's image (illusion) of God. Erotic fusion with a romantic image of God is unrealistic. May believes this removes people from the world and sets up a paradigm in which a person and God are against the world, which leads to possessiveness and jealousy.

Eros, the passionate nature of love, appears to be a basic human need. Although rooted in attachment styles of childhood, *eros* enables a lover to risk giving of oneself intensely and creatively; therefore it requires ego depth and strength (Livermore, 1993). Although it has been stated that *eros* transforms sexuality into spirituality (Coleman, 1994), intimacy--a more mature component of Sternberg's (1988) model of love--becomes a path for the unfolding of personal and spiritual development (Welwood, 1990).

Intimacy

Intimacy is what many consider the core of mature love (Nelson, Hill-Barlow, & Benedict, 1994). The word intimacy is derived from "intimus", the Latin term for "inner" or "inmost" (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993). Besides the feelings of closeness, and connectedness discussed in Sternberg's (1988) model of love, Kiefer (1977) states, "Intimacy is the experiencing of the essence of one's self in intense intellectual, physical and/or emotional communion with another human being" (p. 276). Intimacy is characterized by affection, tenderness, trust, respect for self and another, openness and self-disclosure which combine to lead to deep, meaningful levels of interaction (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Kiefer, 1977; Welwood, 1990). Accordingly, a person must have a sense of self before he or she can become intimate with another. Maturity is required.

According to Fromm (1956), "Love is the concern for life and the growth of that

which we love" (p. 25). Fromm views love as having the potential to be all encompassing, productive, and growth-oriented. Mature love, or intimate love, is mystical--almost a religious experience. The transcendent status of oneness with the universe and with God are perceived as similar to the oneness achieved through union. For love to transpire, it is important to "objectively" know oneself and the other before "union" can occur. This kind of intimacy opposes Fromm's notion of immature erotic love where the other is "little known" and the relationship is based on each individual striving to evade confrontation with his or her own insecurities. Without the knowledge derived through intimacy, the lovers become "addicted to love" or overly dependent on each other, and defenses prevail.

The intimacy of love does not have to be consummated in the intimacy of sex, but they are profoundly related (Levine, 1991). Intimacy provides the groundwork for people to become lovers. According to Levine, intimacy enables lovers to make love again and again, and to shed their inhibitions during lovemaking so that they can eventually discover their sexual potential with one other. Moore (1994) offers this description:

The intimacy in sex, while always attached to the body, is never only physical... In a sexual relationship we may discover who we are in ways otherwise unavailable to us, and at the same time we allow our partner to see and know that individual. As we unveil our bodies, we also disclose our persons. (p. 72)

Sexual intimacy depends on the intimacy of love to develop more completely.

The potential of sexual intimacy is the theme of the "Quantum Model of Sex" promoted by Schnarch (1991), a renowned sex therapist. According to Schnarch, human capacity for intimacy, what he believes is quintessentially human about human sexuality, enables a person to have profoundly transcendent communion with another human. Schnarch's approach changes the focus of intimacy from the other person to oneself. In his view, true intimacy is a self-reflective process that involves self-confrontation and self-disclosure in the presence of a partner. "Self-validated" intimacy encourages a person to develop so that novelty and growth can be part of relational intimacy.

Schnarch's (1991) "self-validated intimacy" promotes experiencing sex at the limits

of one's potential. This spiritual dynamic of sexual intimacy produces mystical experiences that include: time stoppage, loss of pain awareness, laserlike focusing of consciousness, age shifting, and lack of separation between partners. Schnarch believes the "eye-opening" potential of spiritual sexual intimacy is incumbent upon a shift in the nature of desire, from desire out of emptiness to desire out of fullness. People who desire out of fullness discover they are already emotionally satisfied. They seek out their partner not for purposes of reassurance or validation but to celebrate what they already feel. Orgasm does not diminish desire for their partner, or for sex either. Even though the body is satiated, the soul and the spirit continue the celebration. Desire out of fullness carries with it a sense of letting go of what is known (these can be limitations) and freely discovering more about oneself and one's partner. Fullness and meaning to personhood is enhanced as "quantum" sexual intimacy prevails.

As humans mature and age, their capacity for self-validated intimacy--and intimate sex--increases (Schnarch, 1991). Genital prime, during young adulthood, is not the same as sexual prime, around mid-life. Recent research from Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (1994) indicate that the group in America that has the most sex is not the "young-and-restless" singles, it is married couples. These university of Chicago researchers conclude with a statement that links traditional sexual ethics and sexual fulfillment: "Our results mean that an orthodox view of romance, courtship, and sexuality--your mom's view, perhaps--is the only route to happiness and sexual satisfaction" (p. 198). Sexual and spiritual potential requires time to mature (Dubay, 1981; Harron, 1981). A certain self-abandonment is required for which personal defenses may arise. It takes maturity to be able to act in an "immature" fashion, without fears of losing control (orgasm) or to be emotional in front of another.

Studies also reveal that the self-confident, self-defined person possesses more body awareness, thus, can guide erotic stimulation in a more meaningful and gratifying manner (Fisher, 1989; Helminiak, 1989). Nelson, Hill-Barlow, and Benedict (1994) discovered that levels of self-esteem and maturity were significantly correlated in a positive direction with

scores of relational satisfaction and sexual satisfaction among couples. McCann and Biaggio's (1989) research with married couples revealed positive relationships between sexual enjoyment and the variables self-actualization and meaning and purpose in life. The above research indicates that spiritual dimensions of human experience are related to intimacy that includes sexuality.

Enjoyment in sexuality is related to the depth of intimacy between partners and the length of time developing a monogamous relationship (Donaldson, 1989). Physical health benefits are also established by long-term lovemaking. Cutler (1991) found that regular sexual intercourse orchestrates the hormone levels and immunity systems of men and women. She suggests that only committed relationships allow sex so regularly. Cutler also points out that orgasms are not the key for healthy body cycles; rather, it is the physical and emotional intimacy shared with a member of the opposite sex. Sexual intimacy has significant bearing on relational intimacy. Donnelly's (1993) extensive research demonstrates that sexually inactive marriages are unhappy, unstable, and lacking shared activities, which lead to increased likelihood of separation.

Summarizing the preceding section, sexuality and spirituality can be understood as yearnings for completion and connection that are manifested in human experience as similar energies. Certain perceptions root sexuality and spirituality in the fertile soil of love. Eros can transform sexuality into spiritual ecstasy. The intimacy of love can be a potent vehicle to help humans contact a deeper level of truth and celebrate the mystery of spiritual and sexual connection. I conclude this section with Fuchs' (1983) memorable summary of the connections among love, sex, and spirituality:

Sexual pleasure leads man and woman to a consciousness of the profundity of their existence, which belongs to the spiritual order. In the experience of love, which is both the encounter of bodies and the approach of the mystery of persons when bodily union does not change, man and woman can discover that the spirit is not truly received until the flesh of existence is not denied but celebrated.... An authentic spirituality of vulnerability and of gift can therefore undergird the erotic celebration

of love.... The body of the other is a sign that must be deciphered, a hope to be perceived, a gift to be accepted, a presence to be welcomed. (p. 231)

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY & PEAK EXPERIENCE

Profound events that are simultaneously spiritual and sexual have transpersonal or "beyond the person" qualities. Transpersonal psychology--the study of transpersonal experience--is rooted in the "world's perennial philosophy" (Wittine, 1989; p. 269). Huxley (1994) offers the following definition of the world's perennial philosophy:

... the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality (p. vii).

According to Frager (1989), the transpersonal movement assumes there is an underlying transcendent reality and there is value for humans to experience higher states of consciousness that connects them to the transcendent reality. Evolving from humanistic psychology, this "fourth force" arose to explore spirituality and alternative states of consciousness such as Maslow's spontaneous, ecstatic, unitive states referred to as "peak experiences" (Walsh, 1993).

Because transpersonal psychology includes scholars and practitioners with a variety of philosophical, theoretical, and spiritual persuasions, it is difficult to offer a precise and consensual definition of this psychological school (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993b). Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) surveyed over forty definitions offered since the inception of transpersonal psychology in the 1960s, and proposed a definition that succinctly integrates the most common themes:

Transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness (p. 91).

Walsh and Vaughan clarify that transpersonal psychology focuses on experiences and thus

"allow[s] for multiple interpretations of these experiences and the insights into human nature and the cosmos that they offer" (p. 204). Within this approach there is openness to identify with both or one of the vertical (transcendent) and the horizontal (immanent) dimensions. According to Walsh and Vaughan, there is also freedom to interpret human experience religiously or nonreligiously, theistically or non-theistically.

Since some transpersonal experiences are experiences of the sacred and since some religious experiences are transpersonal, Tisdale (1994) as well as Walsh and Vaughan (1993b) accept that transpersonal topics overlap with areas of religious studies. These authors, along with Frager (1989), propose that an interdisciplinary approach to studying personality and human experience is the most useful for understanding humanity and the cosmos. Indeed, one of the messages of transpersonal psychologies and spiritual traditions is to encourage humanity to "wake up from your suboptimal states of consciousness" and discover "higher states of experience and deeper truth" (Walsh, 1993, p. 131).

One of the emerging new fields within transpersonal psychology is the attempt to understand and affirm core-religious, spiritual, ecstatic, or mystical experiences (Frager, 1989; Tisdale, 1994; Walsh and Vaughan, 1993a). Frager understands these transcendental states under the realm of "spiritual psychology." Maslow (1964) subsumed these types of transcendent experiences under his concept "peak experience." This section will define and explore characteristics of mystical peak experience as well as identify common elements that constitute the art of transcendence.

Mystical Peak Experience

Background and Definitions

Abraham Maslow provided major theoretical influence to the understanding of human potential and transcendence (Frager, 1989). Maslow (1970) generalized about human nature by studying the healthiest and most creative people. These "self-actualizing" humans were loosely defined as exhibiting "the full use and exploitation of talents,

capacities, potentialities, etc." (p. 150). As time went on, Maslow (1971) added the study of transcendence to his work on self-actualization. He found that some self-actualizing individuals had many transcendent peak experiences, whereas others had them rarely if ever. He discovered that self-actualizers who had transcendent experiences were more aware of the sacredness of all things. They tended to think "holistically," were better able to transcend dichotomies than "merely healthy" self-actualizers, and exhibited reverence, creativity, acceptance, and freedom from blocks, controls, and fears. Maslow also revealed that peak moments could be experienced by any person.

Before exploring the constructs related to peak experiences, some more concise definitions of the concept will be offered. Peak experiences, according to Maslow (1962), are "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" (p. 69). In peak experiences he recognized a level of psychological experiencing that surpasses the usual level in intensity, meaningfulness, and richness. Leach (1963; p. 11) defined peak experience as:

that highly valued experience which is characterized by such intensity of perception, depth of feeling, or sense of profound significance as to cause it to stand out, in the subject's mind, in more or less permanent contrast to the experiences that surround it in time and space.

Laski (1962), studying "ecstasy," further defined peak experience as "characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued, and extraordinary to the point of often seeming as if derived from a praeternatural source" (p. 5).

More recent interpretations of peak experience are proposed by Privette (1983; 1986) and Privette and Bundrick (1991). Peak experiences are defined as intense and highly valued moments that are mystical and transpersonal. These profound incidents are marked by joy, lasting significance, ineffability, encounter with others, and spirituality.

Although Maslow (1964) used peak experience as an inclusive term that included religious experience, these privileged moments can be interpreted as religious and Christian believers regularly do so (Godin, 1985; Larsen, 1979). According to Maslow, the most religious feature of the various peak experiences is the "lively perception that the entire

universe is an integrated and unified whole" (p. 69). Transpersonal psychologists, whether religious or not, accept that there is a mystical or spiritual element in this dimension of cosmic union (Frager, 1989; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a).

"Peakers," or those people who are most open to peak experience, are sometimes referred to as mystics (Maslow, 1964). While mysticism has different meanings, Frager (1989) suggests that in its original sense, "mysticism is the art of the spiritual life whose aim is union with the Divine" (p. 301). He elaborates that mystical experience cannot be put into words. Underhill's (1961) classic book Mysticism, refers to mysticism as:

the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood (p. xiv).

Imbach (1992), incorporating a more theistic perspective on mysticism, proposes that mystics seek union or connection with themselves, others, creation, and the source of life-- God. He believes that the essence of mystical bonding is love.

Looking at profound mystical or religious experience from a Christian vantage point, Stark (1965) developed an empirically based taxonomy of religious experience cataloging an array of experiences reported in the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Stark's classification of types is based upon a continuum of social distance between the human and Divine "actors." Each encounter implies a degree of closeness (distant to intimate). It is along this continuum that Stark places his four major types-- confirming, responsive, ecstatic, revelational. According to Stark the ecstatic experience:

involves all the components of the two less intimate types--an awareness of the divine and a sense that the awareness is returned--and in addition denotes a deepening of this sense of mutual awareness into an affective personal relationship (p. 105).

This profound religious encounter is referred to as mystical and is one of intense intimacy. Motifs of union, engulfment by divine love, and erotic connection characterize the ecstatic experience. Stark's typology is in accord with Goodenough's (1965) description of Christian

mystics speaking of sexualized bonding with God.

Mystical Peak Experience Constructs

Peak experiences are only peak in relation to lesser or lower experiences. Therefore, in understanding these mystical encounters, it is important to examine the characteristics that distinguish these profound occasions from normal living. Although Maslow (1964) delineated twenty-five "religious aspects of peak-experiences," for the sake of brevity and clarity the current study will use Pahnke's (1980) nine-category typology of mystical peak experience. Frager (1989) points to Pahnke's mapping of mystical encounters as an example of spiritual psychology within transpersonal perspective. MacKnee (1996) demonstrated the utility of Pahnke's categories by incorporating them as a framework for understanding and relating peak potentials for sexuality and spirituality. Peak experience constructs from Maslow, Godin (1985), Laski (1962), and Privette (1983; 1986) will provide elaboration and affirmation of Pahnke's model.

After studying the writings of mystics and interacting with scholars who had tried to characterize mystical experience, Pahnke (1980) proposed a phenomenological typology of mystical peak experiences. The nine categories were constructed on the belief that they are universal and not restricted to any specific religion or culture. These characteristics can be interpreted by culture and religion, but are considered a special part of general human experience.

1. Unity

The first characteristic of peak mystical experience is an internal unity of experience. The experiencer finds unity through an inner world in which there is a loss of usual sense impressions and a loss of self, without consciousness (Pahnke, 1980). Awareness of this internal unity continues to be experienced and remembered. Maslow (1964) describes the experience of internal unity as the transcending of dichotomies and polarities of life as the person moves toward fusion, integration and inner unity.

External unity of experience is also characteristic of peak mystical experiences.

External unity is perceived outwardly with the physical senses through the external world. The person feels that the usual separation between self and an external object or person is no longer present in a basic sense (Pahnke, 1980). There is a sense of oneness with the object or person. In other words, loss of self is experienced as absorption in the larger whole, however the whole is defined (Laski, 1962; Maslow, 1964). This could mean union with God, creation, or bodily and psychological union with another person.

2. Transcendence of Time and Space

Transcendence of time and space means that there is a loss of one's usual sense of time and space--either 'clock time' or a personal sense of past, present, and future--within mystical peak experiences (Pahnke, 1980). Maslow (1964) describes this timelessness as being very sharply contrasted with normal everyday experience. One may grasp "in a very operational sense, a real and scientific meaning of 'under the aspect of eternity'" (p. 63). Time becomes irrelevant and exists, for the moment, only outside the peak experience.

3. Deeply Felt Positive Mood

A deeply felt positive mood often accompanies intense peak experiences. Positive mood includes acute feelings of joy, blessedness, and peace that can elevate one to the highest level of human experience (Privette, 1986; Pahnke, 1980). Defenses and inhibitions are temporarily allayed and heightened passions find freedom for expression. These feelings may occur at the peak of the experience or in the "ecstatic afterglow" when the peak has passed, but its memory is still vivid and intense. Laski (1962), Stark (1965), and Pahnke reveal that self-less, giving love is frequently felt with the joy and peace. According to Maslow (1964), during peak moments the self and the world is accepted and perceived as good and desirable. A spontaneous sense of personal unworthiness for the marvelous gift of the profound encounter pervades the peak experience (Godin, 1985; Maslow).

4. Sense of Sacredness

A sense of sacredness surrounds mystical experience. Privette (1986) describes this aspect as a sense of reverence or a feeling that what one experiences is holy or divine. Pahnke (1980) defines this as a "nonrational, intuitive, hushed, palpitant response of awe

and wonder in the presence of inspiring realities" (p. 187). Maslow (1964) characterized the peak experience with emotions like wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and worship. He goes on to liken the experience to "a personally defined heaven" (p. 66). The peak experience's intrinsic realization of spirituality linked to human experience is the basis for responding with wonder and awe. Godin (1985) reflects that peak experiences are felt internally and are a sign of the awakening of spiritual intentionality. Under these conditions, peak experiences can be said to be divine and can be interpreted in a religious manner.

5. Objectivity and Reality

A certain objectivity and illumination of reality is often part of the mystical experience. The illumination occurs at an intuitive level and is gained by direct experience and certainty of the realness of the experience (Pahnke, 1980). What becomes "known" requires no rational proof and an inward feeling of objective truth is produced. Pahnke suggests that insight into "being" in general and into one's personal self may be achieved.

Support for an experiential basis in objectivity is given in research that suggests peak experiences are not instances of regression, but are characteristically experienced by psychologically healthy persons with strongly developed egos (Hood, 1974). Freud (1961) denied that intuitive knowledge derived from religious experience could be reliable. He believed this knowledge had its source in illusion. Yet, people who have peak experiences speak of self-illumination as well as insight into "truth" or "God" or spirituality (Privette 1986; Privette & Bundrick, 1991). If this knowledge were merely subjective, would persons respond to this "truth" to a greater degree than to other widely accepted objective truth? The presence of persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior among peakers (Godin, 1985; Maslow, 1964) suggests otherwise. Spiritual experiences have not only produced great illuminations and insights, but have also resulted in religious conversions (Maslow, 1971).

6. Paradoxicality

Peak experiences bear an intrinsic paradoxicality that avoids rational interpretation. For example, in the experience of unity, the "I" both exists and does not exist--self is

emptied to become full, or one may achieve separateness from, and at the same time unity with, another (Pahnke, 1980). Maslow (1964) speaks of resolving the dichotomy between pride and humility in peak experiences. One feels proud in the sense of self-fulfillment, and humble in the sense of gratitude for the experience. The dichotomy is resolved by "fusing them into a single complex superordinate unity" (p. 68). Spiritually, one may feel fulfilled and privileged when one experiences spiritual union. At the same time, one feels humbled with thankfulness for this precious moment.

7. Alleged Ineffability

The ineffability characteristic means that peak experiences often defy words. Mystics and those who have peak experiences insist either that words fail to describe the experience or that the experience is beyond words (Pahnke, 1980; Privette, 1986). In these profound mystical or spiritual events, the relationship to the object of love is central, involving an "ineffable admiration" (Godin, 1985, p. 88). This indescribable admiration is the basis for the experience--the reason why the experience may have occurred in the first place. Thus, lack of adequate words may hold true for the experience, but also for the person with which the union is experienced.

8. Transiency

Transiency refers to the temporary nature of the experience, in contrast to the relative permanence of usual experience (Pahnke, 1980). The mystical encounter is not sustained indefinitely, eventually disappearing to the more usual. Laski (1962) uses the terms "transitory," "unexpected," and "rare" to describe the mystical peak experience. During these occasions people may feel close to another, close to God, or even close to death (Privette, 1986). It is understandable that humans long for these moments of perfect union (Godin, 1985). Godin suggests that the transient nature of these mystical experiences contributes to the profound meaning and positive effects realized by the peaker.

9. Persisting Positive Changes in Attitude and Behavior

Attitudes and behaviors that typically change toward positive directions as a result of mystical peak experiences include increased inner strength, creativity, feelings of joy, more

tolerance and sensitivity towards others, a sense of meaning and purpose, and greater appreciation for peak experiences (Maslow, 1964; Pahnke, 1980; Privette, 1986). These and other self-enhancing effects may occur in relation to self, others, life, or the experience itself. What one derives from the experience is unique and personal. Maslow indicates the aftereffects of the peak experience on the person can be profound--like religious conversions--or can be "lesser therapeutic" influences. He distinguishes "peakers" and "non-peakers" largely based on the effects of their experience. The peaker accepts the experience and uses it for personal growth and fulfillment, while the non-peaker suppresses the experience thereby avoiding growth.

All nine characteristics of mystical peak experiences point to an understanding of the profound, derived through physiological, psychological and spiritual experiences. The qualities of these profound occasions demonstrate the transpersonal nature of peak mystical experience. The experiencer momentarily transcends the typical level of functioning and realizes potentially life-changing consequences. Examining the triggers and pre-conditions that might lead to these transcendent states follows.

Triggers and Common Elements Leading to Transpersonal States

Some common triggers for peak experience have been identified. Laski (1962) found among her research group the following instigating experiences for ecstasy in descending order of frequency: "art, nature, sexual love, religion, exercise and movement, creative work, 'beauty,' childbirth, scientific knowledge, recollection and introspection, and poetic knowledge" (p. 492). Maslow (1971) empirically discovered that music and sex are the most common triggers for peak experiences. As early as 1902, William James wrote that by the use of nitrous oxide he experienced "a vivid feeling of reconciliation ...as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity" (p. 387). Pahnke (1980) and Godin (1985) point to the transcendent states produced by psychedelic drugs such as LSD (lysergic acid) and psilocybin.

Although transcendental techniques and practices vary widely, Walsh and Vaughan

(1993a) propose that there are six "common elements" that constitute the heart of "the art of transcendence." While the factors delineated by Walsh and Vaughan are not specific triggers that produce peak experiences such as those mentioned above, they are typical pre-conditions that facilitate transcendental states or some are common effects produced by the experience. These components have been refined and distilled from the contemplative core of the world's great religious traditions. Examination of the six common elements that promote transcendental potentialities are examined below.

According to Walsh and Vaughan (1993a) ethical training is regarded as foundational for transpersonal development. Ethical behavior undermines destructive mental factors such as greed and anger, while cultivating positive mental factors such as kindness, compassion, and calm. As transpersonal maturation occurs, "ethical behavior is said to flow spontaneously as a natural expression of identification with all people and all life" (p. 3). People at this stage of ethical functioning correspond to Kohlberg's (1981) highest or seventh stage of moral development--a stage that Kohlberg believed required transcendent experience.

The second common element that facilitates the art of transcendence is attentional training (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). William James (1910) commented, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgement, character, and will" (p. xii). Walsh and Vaughan believe that attention can and must be sustained, if humans are to mature beyond conventional developmental limits. The ability to direct attention at will is important because the mind tends to take on qualities of the objects to which it attends (Goldstein, 1983). For example, thinking of a loving person may elicit feelings of love. Therefore, focusing attention can cultivate specific emotions and motives.

Emotional transformation is the third common element suggested by Walsh and Vaughan (1993a). Walsh and Vaughan propose three components to emotional transformation. The first is the reduction and relinquishment of destructive emotions such as fear, anger, or guilt. The second is the elevation of positive emotions such as love, joy,

and compassion. These authors point to Christianity's notion of "agape" love--accepting others unconditionally--as a useful description of positive emotions. The third component to emotional transformation is the cultivation of equanimity. This is a composure "that fosters mental equilibrium and as such it helps emotions such as love and compassion to remain unconditional and unwavering even under duress" (p. 4).

Ethical behavior, attentional stability, and emotional transformation work together, along with practices such as meditation, to redirect motivation in more productive, transpersonal directions (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). Motivation, the fourth common element, becomes more focused and mature as "desires gradually become less self-centered and more self-transcendent with less emphasis on getting and more on giving" (p. 5). This shift in motivation is analogous to Maslow's (1971) hierarchy of needs. One becomes less attached to the world as the self seeks higher purposes. Walsh and Vaughan note that redirecting motivation involves reducing the compulsive craving of desire. Their notion corresponds to Schnarch's (1991) model of intimacy--desiring another out of fullness, rather than emptiness. (Schnarch's understanding was illuminated in the preceding section on love and intimacy.)

Because humans tend to "see through a glass darkly" (Apostle Paul), the fifth element of the art of transcendence aims to refine awareness (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). In Walsh and Vaughan's words:

Perception is to be rendered more sensitive, more accurate, and more appreciative of the freshness and novelty of each moment of experience. Likewise, intuitive capacities, usually blunted or blinded, are to be cultivated (p. 6).

These authors propose that one of the primary tools for refining awareness is meditation. Meditation is said to heighten sensory perception and to refine intuitive capacities because it makes awareness of the "present moment" possible. According to Walsh and Vaughan, when humans "see things clearly, accurately, sensitively and freshly, [they] can respond empathically and appropriately" (p. 6). This kind of refined awareness can, therefore, be therapeutic.

Walsh and Vaughan's (1993a) sixth quality encouraged by the art of transcendence is wisdom. According to Walsh and Vaughan, developing wisdom requires self-transformation that is "fostered by opening defencelessly to the reality of 'things as they are,' including the enormous extent of suffering in the world" (p. 7). Existentialists such as Yalom (1981) and Tillich (1954), as well as spiritual therapists such as Henri Nouwen (Uomoto, 1995) promote the meaning and purpose that suffering can produce. Wisdom is gained as people recognize their limits and transcend the suffering self to a higher state of consciousness and connection with the cosmos. Walsh and Vaughan suggest that with this kind of liberating wisdom the art of transcendence is realized.

By analyzing the heart and the art of the various processes of transcendence from the world's great religious traditions, Walsh and Vaughan (1993a) have proposed the six essential, common elements indicated above. Although they believe these capacities of the mind are highly interdependent and the development of one fosters the development of others, Walsh and Vaughan admit that the art of transcendence requires further investigation to validate and appreciate the experience of transcendence.

Summary and Critique of Transpersonal Theory and States

According to transpersonal psychology, human experience includes other states of consciousness besides waking consciousness. States of consciousness found in meditation and mystical experience are valid and can inspire greater self-awareness, more accurate perception of the world, additional energy, increased intuitive sensitivity and inspiration, and deeper levels of intimacy. These transpersonal states are understood as essentially healthy and as maturing potentialities for humanity. The experience of self-transformation gleaned through such elevated states could be argued as part of the culmination of healthy adult development.

The spiritual nature of personhood is emphasized in transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal models of the universe include both meaning and divine elements, regardless of how they are interpreted. The essence of human functioning is sacred. In Frager's (1989)

words:

At the core of humanity is our relatedness to God. Thus religious faith and the mystical quest are not irrational or neurotic.... On the contrary, they are manifestations of our deepest and truest selves (p. 302).

Transpersonal psychologists believe an essential task of spiritual psychology is the study of the deep Self and its relation to others and what one believes to be God. By tuning one's attention inward, the seeker develops self-understanding and becomes free of fear and restriction. In developing love and devotion, the individual is inspired to new levels of understandings and the experience of connection with self, others, God, and the cosmos.

The world's religions are founded upon genuine mystical experiences (Frager, 1989; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a). The unifying nature of profound spiritual events can encourage self-transformation and growth. Core religious experiences can be interpreted and validated variously by different religions.

Although the school of transpersonal psychology has opened the door to examining spirituality and mystical states of peak experience, the available research is quite general. Common constructs or themes of peak mystical experiences have been proposed (see Pahnke, 1980 and Maslow, 1964 above), however, there is little research on specific types of peak experience. Focusing on distinct experience of particular mystical events not only unpacks more of the meaning of that special experience, it also adds to the discernment of transcendental states. Barbara Vaughan (1982) published a phenomenological report on the ecstatic components of childbirth, but other triggers to peak events and other types of peak experience are largely unexamined. Stark's (1965) ecstatic experience of erotic connection with God has not been studied. Peak mystical experience marked by spirituality and sexuality need to be explored to further understanding of transpersonal constructs and to gain comprehension of the specific phenomenon. More detailed study of profound spiritual and sexual connection could lead people to a clearer picture of the process of spiritual and relational development. Potential to access deeper levels of spiritual and sexual functioning may result. The present study aims to fill some of the gaps in existing transpersonal

research.

Transpersonal psychology also promotes the examination of core human experience within specific cultural and religious traditions. Most of the transpersonal literature has emphasized interest in Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Tisdale, 1994). Believing that Western spirituality or Christian spirituality has something to offer to the discipline of transpersonal psychology as a whole, this immediate study addresses part of the need to include a Christian perspective on spiritual experience. The specific mystical experience of sexual and spiritual connection has only been studied from a Tantric (Eastern religious) vantage point (e.g. see Sokol, 1986 reviewed later in this chapter). Examining the phenomenon of profound sexual and spiritual experience among practising Christians allows for description of how the sexual and spiritual relationship is affected by the spiritual practices and beliefs of Christian spirituality. This present examination also relates more particularly to the larger numbers of the North American community whose religious roots are Christian.

A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

Although "integrating" psychology and Christian theology is a fairly recent concept (Fleck & Carter, 1981), Narramore (1973) suggests that there is increased effort to understand psychological functioning from theological perspectives and theological notions through the lens of psychology. Beck (1992) argues that "theology can serve to link psychological studies with the breadth of human knowledge" (p. 101). Theology is an academic enterprise that can reveal new views on human functioning from what is found in psychology alone. Beck goes on to propose that theology can orient people to the illumination of the vertical or spiritual factor of human existence. The dialectic between theology and psychology suggests that neither discipline can ignore the other if a more complete understanding of human experience is desired.

Ontological issues are raised with respect to interpreting mystical or transpersonal experience. While William James (1902) believed mystical experience could be understood without theological claims, Hood (1989) argues that because theistic mysticisms entail union with God, "only within particular theologies can claims to knowledge or union with God be evaluated" (p. 339). Therefore, theology is part of the sieve through which the profound sexual and spiritual encounter is filtered.

According to Smedes (1994), "The average Christian has an especially hard time integrating his [or her] sexuality with his [or her] faith" (p. 3). This section attempts to outline a Biblical theology of sexuality that illuminates a Christian perspective on the origins and purposes of sexuality. Although an exhaustive Christian theology regarding sexuality is beyond the scope of this study, the following overview serves to ground a positive basis for the experience of sexuality among Christians as well as demonstrate how a Biblical theology on sexuality can encourage connection between Christian beliefs and sexual functioning. This segment is especially indebted to the following Christian theologians--Alcorn (1985), Barth (1960; 1968), Nelson (1978; 1983), Rohr (1982), Small (1974), and Smedes (1994)--as well as to several Christian counselling psychologists--Mayo (1987), Miles (1967), Penner and Penner (1981), and White (1993).

Surveying the common doctrines used to construct a Christian theology on sexuality, this study will briefly elucidate the ensuing Christian tenets: Sexuality in Creation; Sexuality in Marriage; Sexuality in Embodiment; Sexuality in Light of the Fall and Redemption.

Sexuality in Creation

God created sexuality

According to Christian theology, God is the author and creator of all life. The Genesis account states that "male and female He created them" (1:27). The narrative recounts how God initially created man and saw that it was "not good that the man was alone" (2:18). Therefore, God created woman (2:21-22) so that man could "fulfill his

potential for human relationship" (Small, 1974, p. 129). Although God at several points in the creation story pronounces His work "good," Wheat (1981) clarifies that only when God finished His work and included sexuality does He exclaim it was "very good." Alcorn (1985) is unequivocal in his statement, "Anyone who questions whether sex is good questions whether God is good" (p. 176). Christian theology believes God is the architect of the good "gift" of sexuality that is rooted in human nature.

The relationship between the first man and woman requires further explication. Coll (1989) reveals that many Christians have wrongly interpreted the term "helper" (Genesis 2:18,20) as indication of a subordinate position for the woman. Grenz (1990) explains that the Hebrew word for helper "also refers to one who saves or delivers and is used elsewhere with reference to God in relationship to Israel (Dt 33:7; Ps 33:20)" (p. 32). Just as God was not in an inferior position to His people, woman was not less than man. Grenz points out that Adam was delivered from his solitude by a suitable bonding partner, not merely sexually, but in all dimensions of existence. Wheat (1981) suggests that Adam deeply sensed the bond with the female and responded with the exhilarating love song: She is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23).

The original man and woman relationship was comprised of two equal and complementary halves (Small, 1974). C. S. Lewis (1960) uses the analogies of a key and lock as well as a bow and violin to illustrate the complementary nature of the man and woman relationship. Each gender served the other; by oneself a man or woman could not complete the function of the other or experience the completion of purpose. Barth (1960) maintains that there is no such thing as a self-contained male or female life. This is summarized by Paul's statement: "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman" (I Corinthians 11:11). Christian theology on sexuality proposes that maleness and femaleness is understood as it is experienced in light of the gender opposite. In Small's words: "Man is not man without woman; woman is not woman without man. Sexual interdependency is necessary for establishing self-identify" (p. 130).

Smedes (1994) clarifies that males and females are not required to have sex to

become whole persons. According to Smedes, virgin men and women can experience the essence of personal wholeness by giving themselves to other persons and discovering more about themselves through relating to the opposite gender without the physical climax of personal communion through sexual intercourse. Although Paul recommends singleness in I Corinthians 7:1,7-9, Mayo (1985) reminds readers that Paul is speaking to a sexually immoral population; he is expecting the imminent rapture of all Christians; and that Paul encourages people to live out the gift of singleness or the gift of being married according to God's purposes.

Sexuality is part of God's image

In Genesis 1:26-27, the creation narrative reveals that maleness and femaleness are representative of God's image. The Christian theological meaning of being created in God's image is far beyond the reaches of this study. Barth (1960) and Small (1974) provide in-depth discussion of this doctrine. This study explores two ways in which human sexuality reflects the image of God according to Christian theology.

The doctrine of the Trinity--God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit--three distinct beings, yet one, is basic to Christian theology and an understanding of sexuality in God's image. According to Rohr (1982), "No other religion provides such a beginning and basis for a theology of relationship" (p. 18). Rohr's terms "mutuality," "communion," and "vulnerability" describe the Christian God as "perfect right relatedness" (p. 18). The plurality of God, a God who is "Being-in-relation," is the model for human intimacy (Barth, 1968; Small, 1974). God and humans are "beings-in-relation." Barth and Small suggest that the union of the triune God is similar to the "one flesh" connection of male and female human sexuality. Individually as male and female, humans represent an equally valued aspect of God's image (Smedes, 1994); however, the unity of the man-woman relation experienced in moments of peak communion in sexual intimacy has a corresponding reality in the oneness of the triune, Creator God.

A second doctrine of God held by Judeo-Christian tradition reveals a God who is passion and love (Barth, 1960; Mayo, 1987; Nelson, 1983). The God of the Old and New

Testaments does not disclose Himself as a remote, unapproachable being. For example, throughout the book of Hosea God is depicted as a sensuous caring being who is dependable, sensitive (6:3), tender, loving (11:1), compassionate (11:3-4), and jealous (13:4), whose relationship with His chosen people is defined in terms of sexual love between a human husband and wife (2:16, 19-20). Barth describes the triune God forever existing in love and identifies God as Lover, Christ (Son) as the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit as the Instrument of loving. Christian theology asserts that humans reflect God's image by desiring passionate, loving connection with other humans. God's image is also represented in human passionate desire for connection with God (Psalm 42:1-2) and may be summarized in Augustine's well known prayer, "Thou has created us for thyself, O God, so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Sexuality in Marriage

Christian theology teaches that sexual relations are to be enjoyed within the confines of the marriage institution (Miles, 1967; Smedes, 1994). Small (1974) states, "A biblical theology of sexuality is equivalent to a theology of marriage" (p. 205). Marriage is a "covenantal relationship" or a promise of loving fidelity to another person. In the Old Testament God requested the sign of male circumcision to indicate His people's covenanted relationship with Him (Genesis 17:10-27; Joshua 1:3-5,8). White (1993) suggests that God required circumcision of the penis to remind men (and their mates) of God's promised relationship while they were being sexually intimate. According to Barth (1968), the commitment God had with His people is the same pledge He expects within the marital bond. Inherent in Christian tradition, sexual intimacy in marriage serves a number of purposes that are supported by Biblical texts.

Marital sex symbolizes God's relationship to humanity

The Penners (1981) point out that the Old Testament frequently refers to God's people Israel as God's bride. "Adultery" is the term used in Jeremiah 7:9 and 23:10 to

describe Israel's sin of worshipping other gods. Ezekial 16 relates how God faithfully bathed, oiled, clothed, and adorned His adulterous wife (Israel), who took strangers instead of her husband (verse 32). God's relationship with His people is symbolized as sexual intercourse in Hosea. Isaiah 62:5 reads: "As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

In the New Testament scriptures, the church (the body of believers) is described as being Christ's bride in Ephesians 5:21-33. In this passage Paul states that Christ is the model of personal sacrificial giving for the highest good of the beloved and illustrates the intimate union of Christ and His bride with the marital sexual union of husband and wife. The book of Revelation 19:6-7 points to the final union between Christ and His bride at the "wedding supper" in heaven. Alcorn (1985), Barth (1968), Penners (1981), and Small (1974) believe the sexual relationship in marriage is the best symbol for understanding God's desire to have intense intimacy with humans.

Marital sex is the exclusive symbol of a couple's union

Christian theology on sex is quite emphatic that sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage (Barth 1968; Miles, 1967; Small, 1974). The words of Genesis 2:24--"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."--are echoed by Jesus in Mark 10:8. Barth (1960) postulates that the union experienced in sexual intercourse is emotional, physical, and spiritual and restores wholeness to human experience. Paul refers to this union as a "profound mystery" (Ephesians 5:32) because the marital union represents Christ's connection with His church. Penners (1981) suggest that the word "mystery" in the New Testament is used to connote that the experience is in the process of being revealed. Like the mystery of the Trinity, how more than one can add to one is confusing and paradoxical. Yet, Christian marriage, according to Small (1974) is "marriage in Christ--He is present in the union, making it an earthly three in one" (p. 120). Smedes (1994) sees the life-changing oneness of sexual union that is "intrinsic to life-union" as the reason for Paul's fervent admonitions against adultery in I Corinthians 6:12-20 (p. 109).

Marital sex leads to intimate knowledge of one's partner

The best translation of the Hebrew word "yadah" or sexual intercourse is the literal expression "to know" (Alcorn, 1985; Nelson, 1983; Small, 1974). According to Alcorn, "yadah" speaks of an intimacy wherein two parties see each other as they truly are. Small suggests the term "points to the hidden element in sex which does not come to light except in intercourse" (p. 185). In Hebrew and Christian theology sexual intercourse is far more than merely joining two bodies. Through sexual intercourse one comes to a new awareness of the mystery of one's own and the other's personal identity. The reciprocal nature of this ultimate self-disclosure brings unique knowledge of oneself and the other person. The relationship is forever changed. Because of this interchange of intimate knowledge Jesus forbids sexual intercourse with anyone other than one's married partner (Mark 10:6-12). Perhaps this ability to intimately know self and another person is why humans are the only created animal that can experience coitus face-to-face (Wheat, 1981). Nelson propounds that desire without deep personal knowledge of one's partner, reduces the other person to an object--just a means for personal gratification.

The spiritual nature of intimate knowledge is revealed when the Hebrew word "yadah" is also used to depict the intimate relationship God enjoys with His people (Small, 1974). For example, Jeremiah 1:5 expresses that God "knew" the prophet before he was born. Although this passage does not mean that God had sex with Jeremiah, it does indicate the depth of intimacy and understanding the passionate Christian God experiences with His children.

The Genesis narrative also states, "The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame" (2:25). Barth (1968) suggests that to be unashamed of one's nakedness is to be fully self-aware in the presence of the other. The nakedness was symbolic of the fact that nothing was hidden or withheld between them because there was commitment and trust. Nakedness is also indicative of purity (Smedes, 1994). Paul encourages husbands to cultivate and maintain their wives sexual purity by following Christ's model, who gave Himself for His bride in a way that made her "holy," "radiant," and "blameless" (Ephesians

5:25-27). Really "knowing" oneself and another is fundamental in a Christian theology on sex.

Marital sex is intended for mutual pleasure

Correct understanding of Christian theology about sex includes accepting that God designed human bodies to experience mutual pleasure during sex (Barth, 1968; Mayo, 1985; Penner & Penner, 1981; Small, 1974). Pleasure is not the result of sin, it was authored by God (White, 1978). In Proverbs 5:18, a young man is instructed "to be intoxicated continually in the delight and ecstasy of his wife's sexual love" (Miles, 1967, p. 42). The Song of Songs, is the erotic duet between two unabashed lovers. Throughout the poetic celebration of their encounter, the sensuous and pleasurable experiences of love-making are described and encouraged. Because the blessing of relational delight occurred before the command to bear children in the Genesis narrative (Wheat, 1981) and humans do not mate according to their hormonal cycle in order to reproduce as do other animals, the pleasure of the sexual union has precedence over procreative effects (Penner & Penner, 1981).

The New Testament also commands mutual pleasure in sexual intimacy. In I Corinthians 7:4-5 Paul says:

The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

It is important to note the concessions Paul makes for allowing the cessation of sexual activity are consensual and include time-outs for prayer. Also of significance in this passage is the equality of husband's and wife's rights and meeting of needs.

Barth (1960) and White (1978) suggest that the momentary pleasure experienced during sexual orgasm may be a foretaste of the euphoric ecstasy that will be experienced in a perfect, eternal heaven. Transcending the flaws of self in the celebration of blissful, sexual union could be a picture of Christian paradise.

Marital sex is for procreation

Although the procreative purpose of sex is obvious, Small (1974) points out that this subject is virtually ignored in the New Testament's emphasis upon the relational aspect of marriage. The earliest divine command to humans was, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). This was one of God's ordinances humans were happy to obey (Alcorn, 1985). The creative nature of humanity through sexual reproduction is one more facet of God's divine image represented in human form (Barth, 1960; Small, 1974).

Sexuality in Embodiment

Human sexuality is an ingrained essence of male and female bodies (Mayo, 1987; Nelson, 1983; Smedes, 1994). Genesis 2:7 reads, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." Smedes adamantly illuminates that humans were first bodies. Only after God created the body was life given to humanity. Recognition of "body-life" and the "spirit-enlivened body" leads to acceptance of an "embodied theology of sexuality." Nelson proposes that coming to terms with one's sensual body and acknowledging the body as the vehicle for expressing love and union is essential for a Christian theology of sexuality. Three significant forms of the body's relation to a Christian theology toward sexuality are reviewed in this section.

The Doctrine of Incarnation

Although during certain historical eras (and even today) some Christians seemed uncomfortable and even offended that God would stoop so low as to take on the form of the human body (Nelson, 1983; Smedes, 1994), the New Testament gospels assert that "the Word (God) became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). (See also Paul's words in Philippians 2:5-11.) The incarnation of Jesus Christ confirms the importance and dignity of the embodied human person (Mayo, 1987; Nelson, 1983). Jesus

embraced human flesh and experienced all the feelings and sensations that humans were created to experience. Smedes affirms that Christ no doubt felt erotic passion and arousal--without sexual intercourse--and wonders why Christians demean their own bodies by not accepting the fullness of Christ's body form. Because of the doctrine of incarnation, Nelson insists that body experience must have equal footing with spiritual experience in Christian theology.

The Value of the Body is Biblically Affirmed

While the value of the human body is emphasized throughout scripture (e.g. Jesus' miracles of healing human bodies), three Christian beliefs related to specific Biblical texts regarding the body's worth are highlighted here. First, the human body is "inextricably wrapped up with personal identity" (Mayo, 1987, p. 22). Touching and loving others involves body contact. Smedes (1994) understands Paul's words, "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (I Corinthians 6:18), as demonstrating that the core of personhood is connected to the body. Sexual sin reasserts the separation of body and soul and devalues the worth of the self because sexuality involves the core of self. According to Smedes, sexual sins, "are more serious because they are much more than merely sensual; they involve the deepest and most significant facets of our personhood" (p. 66). As Moore (1989) proposes, sexual immorality is above all unfaithfulness to oneself. The value of personhood is evidenced in acceptance of the body-self.

Second, caring for the body is linked to caring for one's spouse (White, 1993). Paul states in Ephesians 5:28-29:

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.

Although it is recognized that many humans are uncomfortable and ashamed of their bodies, White points out that people cannot truly love their spouses until they learn to "cherish" their own bodies. Paul's words imply that it is expected that humans care for their bodies.

Elsewhere, Paul is careful to discipline his body (I Corinthians 9:27), but never to degrade it. A healthy respect and awareness of one's body promotes connection between lovers and represents Christ's care for His church.

Third, the body is the divine residence of God (Nelson, 1983; Smedes, 1994). Paul states that "the body ... is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (I Corinthians 6:13), and that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit as well as a means to glorify God (6:19-20). Alcorn (1985) suggests that if the sexual body is unvaluable or inherently sinful, God would not desire to reside in it. According to Smedes, the unity of the body and soul espoused by Paul in New Testament passages demonstrates the significance of the body to a person's essence and to God.

The Doctrine of the Resurrection

Christ's physical resurrection from the dead is core to Christian theology and affirms the significance of the body (Mayo, 1987). The gospels confirm that Jesus had a resurrected body and was recognized by those who had known Him (Grenz, 1990). The suffering and resurrection of Christ demonstrates that His body is inseparable from His person and that Christ was a unity of flesh and spirit (Small, 1974).

Christian theology asserts that the human body will also be resurrected. Alcorn (1985), affirms that the Christians from Corinth were confronted by Paul because they were abusing their bodies. Paul reminds them that their bodies would be raised up (resurrected) and inhabited for all eternity (I Corinthians 6:14). Chapter fifteen of I Corinthians is devoted to "the resurrection of the body, a concept held in disdain by Greeks, who wanted only to rid themselves of their bodily prison" (Alcorn, p. 186). According to Grenz (1990), the doctrine of the resurrection, "offers the ultimate critique of all dualist anthropologies, for it declares that the body is essential to human personhood" (30).

Sexuality in Light of the Fall and Redemption

Although Christian theology asserts that God created human sexuality in the sinless perfection of Eden's garden, the disobedience of the original humans distorted all of life

including sexuality. The initiation of human sin, or what Christian theology refers to as "the fall," disrupted the creative purposes of sexuality that were illuminated in the preceding sections. Smedes (1994) asserts, "Christians must forever pick their way between delight in creation's gifts and sorrow for sin's distortions" (p. 27). This section examines the crippling effects of sin on human sexuality and then highlights the redeeming or restoring intentions of the Christian understanding of salvation.

The Effects of the Fall

The first effect of sin on human sexuality is recorded in Genesis 3:7, "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Attempting to cover their nakedness with fig leaves, Small (1974) contrasts this human experience to the unashamed state before the fall (Genesis 2:25) and suggests that a primary outcome of sin was the loss of innocence and the addition of sexual shame. According to Small, shame is the result of broken relationships--the union between the man and woman and the union between humans and God was marred. Bonhoeffer (1959) states:

Shame is the expression of the fact that we no longer accept the other person as the gift of God....In the unity of unbroken obedience man [or woman] is naked in the presence of man [or woman], uncovered, revealing both body and soul, and yet he [she] is not ashamed. Shame only comes into existence in the world of division. (p. 63).

In a state of wholeness there was no shame; however, when the complementary union was broken through disobedience, the first humans felt chagrin in each other's presence (Smedes, 1994). In Christian theology shame is the result of sin and promotes fear between humans and between humans and God (Genesis 3:10).

Shame also manifested itself as a divisive force within each human. Moore (1989) proposes that the Genesis story depicts how shame came to be where it should not be. In Moore's words, "Man [woman] is ashamed of his [her] body because it remains faithful to God in being what it is while man [woman] tries to be God" (p. 99). Moore's theology asserts that because of sin there is a fundamental split--the basic alienation between the

human being and the body. The body retains its creatureliness, while the soulish human, working at controlling the body, seeks immortality. The dualism between body and spirit (soul), induced by inappropriate shame, promotes these dimensions of humanity to seek gratification independently and competitively.

Nelson (1983), Grenz (1990), Small (1974), and Smedes (1994) suggest that the dualism between body and spirit caused by shame is represented by people in today's world attempting to desensitize shame in sexuality by making sexual images so commonplace. These theologians suggest that tolerating public nakedness creates a self-defeating illusion of sexual wholeness; in reality this form of attempting to decrease shame with sex creates an empty, superficial, banal, and trivial sexuality. Sex has lost its mystery, wonder, and longing due to this superficial loss of shame. Commenting on the dualism between personal being and sexuality in contemporary society, Brunner (1947) states, "Only the complete return to love, to existence in love, could banish that division, bridge that duality. Man's [woman's] inability at this point causes him [her] to treat sexuality in the only other way he [she] knows-- impersonally" (p. 349).

Due to the distorting consequences of the fall, the apostle Paul is accused by some Christians and non-Christians of fostering a tragic disdain for the human body (Alcorn, 1985; Small, 1974). The understanding that Paul's view was "sex is of the flesh" betrays a common but serious misinterpretation of Pauline theology (Short, 1978). While Paul maintained that sexual immorality is of the flesh, in Paul's writings the flesh is not synonymous with the body. According to Alcorn, "the flesh is the sin principle, the depraved force that influences a man [woman] toward sin, prompting him [her] to misuse the members of his [her] body to disobey God" (p. 185). Therefore, Christian theology recognizes that sin effects sexuality, but sex is not inherently sinful.

A second effect of the fall is the twisting of the divinely appointed gender roles (Grenz, 1990). The man and woman were created in order to supplement each other. After the fall, the male/female relationship digressed into competition. Genesis 3;16, the consequence of sin suffered by the woman, reads, "And your desire shall be for your

husband, and he shall rule over you." Small (1974) points out, "That original equality which characterized their relationship has become inequality" (p. 160). While both genders experienced negative outcomes due to their sin, Grenz clarifies that, "Sex roles, which were given by God in view of the procreative and nurturing functions, are now incomplete expressions of God's design and lie under bondage" (p. 34). The subordination of women was an effect of the fall and not the intent of God's original creation.

Because of the effects of the fall, the self-giving love and devotion between the sexes gave way to "division and contradiction, bringing a new and alien devotion to self" (Small, 1974, p. 158). Love turned inward, independently gratifying the self, and "selfishly exploiting others" (Grenz, 1990, p. 34). Christian theology points to sin's distortion of one's lover as an object of desire and possession. These effects are quite contrary to the original design of complementary unity.

The Effects of Redemption

Christian theology asserts that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to deliver humanity from the effects of the fall. This doctrine, referred to as the gospel--the good news of salvation or redemption--is a work of grace that brings freedom from the deformities of sin (Barth, 1960; Grenz, 1990). In regards to human sexuality, Smedes (1994) states, "Grace is not against nature but only against the distortions of nature. Grace does not put sexuality down; it raises it up into the service of spirit" (p. 61). Salvation restores human sexuality to the order of creation and "liberates sexuality as a power of love" (Smedes, p. 61).

The Christian doctrine of reconciliation is the message of the New Testament (Barth, 1960). The New Testament teaches that "the barriers between men and women have been broken down because of Christ" (Penner & Penner, 1981, p. 43). Through salvation men and women have equal rights, restoring the complementary pre-fall relationship. Paul's words in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," is one of many passages that emphasizes gender equality. Paul commands "mutual submission" between husband and wife in Ephesians

5:21.

The divisive effects of the fall can be reversed through the liberation of salvation (Mayo, 1987). The Christian theology of salvation affirms the reinstatement of relationships. According to Small (1974), "when the God-man [woman] relationship is restored in Christ, the first sphere to reflect that restoration will be the Christian couple's one-flesh union" (p. 160). The mystery of oneness can potentially be experienced after salvation because humans can be freed to be "other-directed," rather than "self-directed," in their love (Barth, 1960; Nelson, 1981; Small).

The outcome of salvation is to deliver humans from the effects of the fall. Smedes (1994) points out that "redemption does not turn us from sexuality; it illuminates the goodness of it" (p. 88). Christian theology can promote the merits of sexuality in creation, passion, marriage, and embodiment that are described above because of the restoration of God's design for human relationships. Although Christian theology recognizes that humans live in a "fallen world" where limitations and distortions of love and sexuality prevail for Christians and non-Christians, there is potential for peak moments of union where the Edenic state of sexual and spiritual connection can be experienced. Those occasions in which Christians relinquish their selfish desires and defensive inhibitions and accept God's grace, mystical union with self, another, and God can be realized.

The theological tenets of Christianity provide a framework for perceiving sexual and spiritual connection. However, the profound experience of simultaneous sexual and spiritual arousal has not been explored. Systematically unpacking some of the meaning of this profound event could relate theological perspectives with actual experience. Analyzing the descriptions of peak sexual and spiritual connection among Christians could inform theological understanding of the "mystery" of "one flesh" phenomenon.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH RELATING SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY

Although substantial numbers of theoretical and conceptual expositions relating spirituality and sexuality appear in the literature, published sources are bereft of empirical research on the subject. After extensive review of the literature, two references that scientifically attempt to establish or describe a connection between spirituality and sexuality were discovered. These articles are examined in this section.

Phenomenological Studies

Sokol's (1986) unpublished dissertation is entitled, "Spirituality and Sexuality: A Phenomenological Exploration of Transcendental States in Sexuality." Using phenomenological methods and aims, Sokol interviewed four men and four women who claimed to have experienced transcendental states in sexual relations. Each of the eight contributors had been trained as Tantric sexual and spiritual practitioners. The eight major themes which emerged from the experiences of Sokol's co-researchers include: 1) the loss of body sense (intensity of awareness to the point of being out of touch with the physical senses); 2) the loss of self-sense (sense of self became diffused); 3) an experience of bliss or ecstasy (states of tranquillity or excitation); 4) intense currents of energy (increase in sensation and forces of movement); 5) light in or surrounding the body (some sort of shining radiance); 6) non-separation/non-duality (oneness or union with a partner or with "God"); 7) non-orgasmic sexual union (an ecstatic state valued beyond orgasm); and 8) feelings of expansion (an experience of freedom beyond normal confines).

Sokol (1986) also found four minor themes from the participants' accounts of transcendental sex. The lesser themes were: 1) the experience of the lover as a god or goddess; 2) the experience perceived as a natural state; 3) happiness; and 4) bodily surrender or relinquishment. According to Sokol the sexual transcendental state embodies great happiness, appearing paradoxically to be unique and "natural", full of wonderment and

mystery but also seeming to be ordinary or like one's true state. The experiencer is not separate from the state experienced; thus, it is ineffable. Peak sexual states are also temporary.

Sovastsky (1985) completed a study of erotic meanings gleaned from eighteen men and women selected to represent three distinct sexualities. The three equally represented groups were identified as "erotic bonders" (orgasm-oriented subjects), "ecstasy-seekers" (neo-tantric practitioners), and "sublimity-seekers" (brahmacharya practitioners). Although there were some qualitative differences among the three groups of sexual practitioners, Sovastsky found that the essential character of *eros* was that of "hiddenness" or "mystery." Sex for all of the participants was a matter of getting close to something hidden, "of bringing something hidden, unconscious, latent or private into clearer or more public view" (p. 4). This does not mean that if *eros* were exposed its nature would become obvious. Rather, drawing closer to *eros* ("the hidden") without reducing or illuminating it connects one more deeply to another and oneself and paradoxically promotes even greater awe, fear, reverence, and mystery. The alluring and seductive aspect of sex is the mystery, not the resolution. The mystery of sex promotes a spiritual dimension, regardless of a person's sexual and spiritual traditions.

Phenomenological research, although limited, does describe some of the interaction between spirituality and sexuality by Eastern spiritual practitioners. The meanings derived by participants point to the potential levels of sexual peak experience one can enjoy. The sense of oneness, mystery, truth, authenticity, elevated sensations, timelessness, and joyful completion experienced by the people involved in these studies support the meanings and energies earlier ascribed to sexuality and spirituality.

WHAT FACILITATES SPIRITUAL AND SEXUAL CONNECTION?

Extensive review of the literature revealed no studies whose sole purpose was to discover what facilitates spiritual and sexual integration were found. Sokol (1986) and Sovastsky (1985) briefly mention some of the factors that their research participants identify as promoting transcendental states in sex. Sex therapists and educators Robert Travis and Patricia Travis (1986) and Mosher (1980) conceptualize about necessary ingredients for deep involvement in sexual intimacy. Voigt (1991) describes some exercises derived from Tantric sex rituals that encourage enhanced personal and relational intimacy in sex. These articles and some related literature are explored in this section.

Empirical evidence

Although not the aim of her study and inadequately explained, Sokol (1986) points to several pre-conditions for transcendental sex identified by her Tantric-trained "co-researchers." The first delineated element that facilitated spiritualized sex was "attention." Attention is described as "the relaxed, unhurried state, in which there were no distractions, no demands, a full focusing of attention, of being embodied with/as the other, pure beingness, fluidity, total relaxation" (p. 222). Attention and feeling become heightened by focusing "beyond oneself." How this is specifically implemented is unclear.

A second necessary step to facilitate spiritual and sexual integration is the ritualization of the sex act (Sokol, 1986). The sexual encounter was prolonged with the performance of a formal ritual. Sokol does not provide examples of sexual rituals. Reading through her contributors' transcripts, I assume she is referring to events like sustained eye contact, listening to music, and burning incense. The third and final pre-condition was to delay and, if possible, forego orgasm. Orgasmic pleasure could occur, but it was not the desired goal. Orgasm could be an impediment to the well-being necessary for the more desirable states of bliss, ecstasy, non-duality, and spiritual growth.

Sovastsky (1985) describes factors that promote interaction between the sexual and

the spiritual as "ontological contexts." The first ontological context is temporality. This is a sense of timelessness or the freedom to have as much time as required--several hours to a 24 hour period for meditative sexual connection. Place is the second ontological context and refers to a private, secluded, somewhat inaccessible room or area that is deemed special and sacred. The last ontological context identified by Sovastsky is embodiment. Embodiment is the ability to be in tune with one's own and another's body. It requires intimate knowledge of body responses and openness to express feelings physically. Sovastsky does not explain any of the ontological contexts in detail, leaving the reader with some questions as to how these contexts are experienced or facilitated.

There is little empirical evidence for particular events facilitating human connection between sexual and spiritual dimensions. As mentioned previously, Sokol (1986) and Sovastsky (1985) derived their findings from participants who were trained in Eastern religious methods of sexual intimacy. No studies that attempt to discover what facilitates integration of sexuality and spirituality among Westerners with a Judeo-Christian heritage have been found. Some authors offer recommendations for enriching sexual experience and connecting sexuality and spirituality. These recommendations are examined next.

Suggestions for sexual and spiritual connection

Voigt (1991), a sex therapist, provides a succinct, yet informative, discussion of how to use Tantric traditions to enhance sexuality and intimacy for Western couples. Voigt suggests five Tantric based explorations for couples. The first exploration is ritual. Partners collaborate to create a uniquely meaningful, somewhat sacred interpersonal climate for intimacy. These meaningful sequences of preparatory exchanges could include behaviors such as reciting poetry, sensual massage, and joint meditation, to creating a climate for intimacy through candles, perfumes, or a special setting.

Synchronized breathing, a second exploration, is a kind of focusing exercise that allows couples to set aside distractions and tune in to each other's body in a relaxed manner (Voigt, 1991). A third exploration is sustained eye contact. Fixing one's gaze into a

partner's eyes is identified as a powerful merging technique through which union can be experienced. Motionless intercourse is the fourth exploration delineated by Voigt. Bringing a still point to sexual connection contrasts with the perpetual motion of conventional lovemaking. The fifth exploration is sexual exchange without orgasm. This can work to facilitate connection with one's partner on a deeper, more spiritual, level. Although on some levels Voigt's (1991) suggestions can approximate sensate focus techniques promoted by conventional sex therapies (e.g. Masters & Johnson, 1994; Travis & Travis, 1986), his recommendations are offered to those who wish to explore more deeply the nature and meaning of their sexual experience.

Chevez-Garcia and Helminiak (1985), adhering to Judeo-Christian traditions, recommend that one of the initial means to becoming more spiritually and sexually integrated is to become comfortable and affirming of one's sexual body. Becoming more at home in one's body by understanding the body's states of relaxation and tension fosters a more holistic approach to human experience. Body awareness combats the divisiveness of dualistic heresies still influencing Westernized spirituality. Rohr (1982) points to the irony that the very religion that believes God came in the flesh, is the most consistently negative in its relatedness to human flesh. Body acceptance leads to deeper union within oneself and deeper communion (union) with a member of the opposite sex.

There are some other non-Eastern recommendations for integrating sexuality and spirituality in the lived experience. Freeman (1988) suggests that accepting and expressing the masculine and feminine dimensions within each person leads to greater individual and relational integration. Freeman believes Westerners should change their theology to see sex as God's good creation. This requires surrendering preconceptions and "letting go" to discover God through sex. Gallagher (1985) advises that matrimonial spirituality is enhanced when couples share prayer together as part of their sexual intimacy. Honest and loving meditation on God, oneself, and one's partner opens new awareness in sexual intimacy and is a path toward spiritual growth (Chevez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985). At this point there is no research to support whether any of these suggestions facilitate sexual and

spiritual integration.

The public image of sex being incompatible with religion in Western society is in doubt. An extensive recent study by Michael et al. (1994) discovered to their surprise that the one group of adult females most likely to experience orgasm during intercourse with their primary partner was conservative Protestant women. A full 32 percent of this group reported "always" experiencing sexual climax, far ahead of the 22 percent among females who have no religious affiliation. The impressed researchers stated "Perhaps conservative Protestant women firmly believe in the holiness of marriage and of sexuality as an expression of their love for their husbands" (p. 62). Michael et al. also found that both conservative Protestant males and females lead all other religious (and non-religious) groups in frequency of sexual intercourse. If sexuality and intimacy are deemed integral dimensions of human experience, perhaps religious conservatives have some enlightening knowledge for the rest of Western society.

SUMMARY & CRITIQUE

After reviewing past attitudes and historical influences regarding the relationship between sexuality and spirituality and providing a conceptual context for connecting the two dimensions based on common origins and similar energies, this chapter attempted to provide a theoretical framework for linking these core experiences. The theories of love demonstrated that sexual and spiritual urges could be related in expressions of human passion and intimacy. Transpersonal psychology provides a theoretical foundation for construing peak mystical events that are profoundly unifying and holistic. It appears that deeper or transcendental levels of sexual love are potentially available for human experience. Within the conceptual lenses of this chapter, sexuality and spirituality are complementary aspects of the human individual and are integral for personal and relational development. The spiritual factor signifies the importance of honesty, meaning, and love in human sexual experience. Sexuality can connect humans to truth about themselves, others, and ultimately God.

Due to mind/body dualism inherited from early church traditions, Christians tend to struggle with linking sexual and spiritual urges. Developing a theology of how these two core experiences are related is a beginning. Exploring the actual experience of sexual and spiritual connection among Christians could challenge dualistic notions that undermine relational potential as well as offer experiential support and meaning for Christian theology. Passion and intimacy among Christians could be revitalized as the spiritual and sexual relationship is celebrated.

Literature on love suggests that there is a spiritual quality to passion and intimacy. While many theorists recognize the mysterious and unifying natures of love and of sexuality, the meaning and experience of love continues to be puzzling. Analyzing the experience of profound spiritual and sexual connection can inform the experience of passion and intimacy within love's bonds.

Transpersonal psychology is concerned with human potential and exploring transpersonal states. Analyzing peak mystical states within this arm of psychology has occurred. However, there are few recent studies of "core religious" or peak experience. Also, while transpersonal psychology is open to various spiritual and religious interpretations of human experience, Christian experience and Christian explication within transpersonal psychology has been neglected. This study addressed these deficits and provides Christian perspective on profound spiritual experience. This research could also inform human relational potential.

How sexuality and spirituality are experientially connected is open to question. Although psychological and religious theorists propose that there is a meaningful relationship between sexuality and spirituality, their discussion is based on conjecture or limited case studies. Little work has been done on exploring the subjective meaning of sexual and spiritual connection for the experiencer. Sokol's (1986) research, the only known study of the phenomenon, is limited to Tantric practitioners. Christian adherents need a voice in describing the experience of profound sexual and spiritual connection so that others of similar backgrounds and faith can better understand their own experience and

potentialities.

Although there are suggestions that sexual rituals, body awareness, sustained focus and attention, and making orgasm a secondary (versus primary) goal of sexual relations play an important role in linking sexuality and spirituality, such evidence is largely based on Tantric sex practitioners or informed opinion and not on empirical research. It is not sufficient to rely upon informed but unsubstantiated opinions to base theory and practice on. Humans from all cultures continue to search for more meaningful connections and personal potential. Western society could discover more about the possibilities of enhanced sexual intimacy from those persons who have experienced it and whose background is also Western. Individuals from Christian religious traditions have not been given a voice to describe the facilitation and experience of spiritual and sexual connection for them. Researchers and practitioners need to explore how the mysterious relationship between sexuality and spirituality in human intimacy is developed and experienced. This information would provide more understanding about facilitating human wholeness and personal and relational intimacy. The purpose of the present study is to provide some initial information to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge by investigating the meaning, promotion, and aftereffects of profound sexual and spiritual encounters among practising Christians.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Phenomenological Methodology

Phenomenological psychology is a "human-science" oriented approach to studying the lived experience of those persons who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Farnsworth, 1985). Existential-phenomenology claims that all knowledge is human knowledge and understood through our phenomenological experience (Osborne, 1990). Rooted in Husserl's (1970) philosophical theories, existential-phenomenology uses critical reflection and description to study the structures of consciousness. Founded in scientific positivism, many current researchers (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Farnsworth, 1985; Giorgi, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989) believe traditional empirical modes of inquiry are inadequate to explain many of the realities of human experience through quantification, operationalization, and manipulation.

Phenomenological research investigates and legitimatizes the human inner experience. Respecting the dignity and integrity of human experience, this qualitative approach focuses on emphatic understanding of persons' experiences of their world(s) (Giorgi, 1970). A phenomenologist "considers the person to be already existing coconstitutionally with his/her world" (Osborne, 1990, p. 80). Therefore the person experiencing the phenomenon is most consciously connected to the experience and is best suited to describe and define the meaning of the experience. The reality about any investigated phenomenon emerges not as one absolute and objective view, but as a composite picture of how the person(s) who have experienced that phenomenon perceive and understand it (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The purpose of phenomenological research is to illuminate the phenomenon of interest

through careful analysis of "the psychological meaning of naive descriptions of personal experiences provided by individuals" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 1). Identifying the "structures that are typical or general for groups of people" reveals the meaning of the phenomenon in question (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.43). The assumption is that although aspects of each individual experience will be unique, similarities will also be apparent. Dialoguing with several individuals who have lived the experience is expected to reveal the patterns or "clusters of themes" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59) that point to a common underlying structure or meaningful description.

Because phenomenological research attempts to understand the meaning of persons' lived experience, there is no subject-experimenter dualism. The "subject" is really a "co-researcher" (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1994) who collaborates with the investigator to illuminate the meaning of the participant's experience. The co-investigator is a true partner in the research enterprise. His or her subjectivity is used, rather than controlled, to unlock the descriptive understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Rational for Research Approach

There were three major considerations in selecting a design for the present study. First, phenomenological methodology allows for an investigation of practising Christians' experience of sexual and spiritual connection from an holistic perspective. Osborne (1990) appropriately points out that, "A growing number of psychologists are unwilling to accept the decontextualization of experience and reduced meaning as a necessary price for the elusive goal of scientific objectivity" (p. 79). In comparison to traditional natural science

methodology, the aims to "explicate the essence, structure, or form of both human experience and human behavior" (Valle et al., 1989, p.6) of an existential-phenomenological approach fits very well with the purposes of this study. Also, according to Osborne (1994), "Existential phenomenology gives more explicit attention to ontological issues. The whole person's being, and not just consciousness, is the focus of attention" (p. 173). From Walsh's (1993) perspective, "Phenomenological mapping and deep structural analysis provides the necessary method for understanding profound transpersonal states" (p. 125). Through phenomenological methodology the co-researchers were allowed to describe the essence of the sexual and spiritual encounter without exclusion of any aspect of themselves or their experience.

The second reason for choosing a phenomenological method of inquiry was to give practising Christians a voice in describing and defining a meaningful experience that was unique and somewhat hidden from the public. Although the rate of occurrence of sexual and spiritual encounters among practising Christians is not known, the experience is largely undisclosed and maintains a concealed quality for the participants themselves. Permitting the co-researchers to describe their profound experience promotes clarification and validity to their personal experience. A phenomenological approach respects the integrity of personal experience (Polkinghorne, 1989) and allows the participant's mind and voice full freedom of expression. Farnsworth (1990) proposes that the phenomenological approach is the best approach for understanding and validating religious experience. Because religious experience is subjectively emotional and rational, the experiencer's participation is necessary to understand the fullness of the experience. Farnsworth goes on to describe criteria for evaluating the meaning and significance of the experience for a Christian community which will be addressed in Chapter Five below. Although the researcher's implicit and explicit

expectations are present to some degree, this research design attempts to account for the impact of the researcher's presence through clear identification of the researcher's frame of reference.

Finally, as a practising Christian who desires to understand how psychological "truth" relates to Christian beliefs, I concur with Farnsworth (1985) that human-science oriented methodologies "open the door for God's direct activity in the conduct of a study by allowing His truths to be revealed through the lived experience" (p. 47). I believe that God exists and is intimately involved with His creation; therefore, He can reveal understanding more directly through real-life dialogue between people trying to help each other get to the heart of the matter. Phenomenological methodology acknowledges God's activity in the conduct of the research, as well as the underlying assumptions and application of the results (Farnsworth, 1981).

Procedure

A number of common steps in conducting phenomenological research are identified by Colaizzi (1978), Farnsworth (1985), Osborne (1990), and Polkinghorne (1989). These include: (1) Framing the Question; (2) Bracketing; (3) Selection of Co-researchers; (4) Data Collection; (5) Data Analysis. The process and applications of these steps are addressed below.

Framing the Question

Framing the question to initiate the interviews followed the guidelines of phenomenological principles. The question defines the context of the research (Osborne,

1990), and "ask[s] how meaning presents itself in experience" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). To reveal the structure of the phenomenon, the existential-phenomenologist seeks to ask the question, What?, versus the question, Why? (Valle et al., 1989). The main research question was derived from the general research problem--What is the meaning and description of profound sexual and spiritual experience among Christian adherents? In accordance with the general research problem, each participant was asked to respond to the following question: "Would you please describe, in as much detail as possible, your experience of a profound encounter that was simultaneously sexual and spiritual; what was it like for you?" To further enhance the contextual understanding of this experience, after a thorough description was disclosed, contributors were also asked: "What were you experiencing prior to this sexual and spiritual encounter?" and "What were the facilitating events that lead you to have this experience?" Finally, co-researchers were queried: "What were the aftereffects of your profound sexual and spiritual experience?"

It was believed that focusing on describing the profound experience as fully as possible was of primary importance. Once completed, the description of the essential encounter would lead the participants to more precisely set the stage for their experience by describing the pre-conditions and facilitating events leading to the experience. Following the descriptions of the experience and the preceding events and conditions, co-researchers were invited to share the aftereffects of their profound experience. Although this progression does not follow usual narrative format--starting with the beginning and proceeding to the middle and the end--(e.g., Cochran, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988), it was assumed that exploring the intensity of the profound encounter first would elicit stronger associations with participants' prior experience and subsequent experience.

Bracketing

Phenomenological methodology recognizes the dialectic between the researcher and the participants and acknowledges the effect of the researcher on all aspects of the research. According to Osborne (1990), "Existential-phenomenology recognizes the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of what are the data, and their interpretation" (p. 81). Rather than attempting to elude such influences through traditional experimental design, the phenomenologist admits to predispositions and assumptions through "bracketing," a process of rigorous self-reflection. This process involves intensive review of the biases and preconceptions that the researcher may bring to the investigation so that these inclinations can be known and suspended during the data collection (Valle et al., 1989). Making these assumptions explicit to both the researcher and the reader enables the reader to judge how well that perspective has illuminated the subject (Osborne, 1990).

Bracketing is an opportunity for the researcher to become alert to personal conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation before formal data collection occurs. For this study, bracketing involved my personal reflections on sexuality and spirituality as I have experienced them, articulation of my presuppositions and understanding of this subject gained through reading and teaching on the relationship between sexuality and spirituality (which includes several academic articles--Macknee, 1996; MacKnee, 1997), and previous discussions with individuals who had experienced sexual and spiritual arousal jointly. Some of the information and insights gained through bracketing are presented in Appendix A. A brief description of the principle researcher is included at the beginning of the "Data Collection" section.

As Colaizzi (1978) points out, "objectivity is fidelity to phenomena" (p. 52). The

reasonable way to avoid coloring the experience of any co-researcher is to trust the "dialogical approach" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 69) and rigorously attend and be present to the experience being related. For the existential-phenomenologist the source of information lies within the immediate experience of the co-researcher.

Selection of Co-researchers

This study included ten individuals--five women and five men. Their demographic backgrounds and profiles are contained in Chapter IV: Results. Selection of the participants followed existential-phenomenological methodology. According to Osborne (1990), "Participants should be people who have experienced and can illuminate the phenomenon" (p. 82). Although 16 individuals responded to the advertisements requesting participation in this study, only ten met the criteria for inclusion and followed through with the interviews. As noted earlier the criteria were: (a) the person identified him/herself as a practising Christian--a person who believed in and worshipped the God of the bible and attended a Christian church; (b) the person had experienced a profound event in which sexual and spiritual connection had occurred; the sexual and spiritual connection was further defined as an event in which sexual arousal and orgasm was simultaneously experienced with the presence of God; (c) each contributor was able to descriptively articulate his or her experience.

Participants were recruited in several ways. First, letters and notices for posting were sent to 80 churches, Christian organizations, and Christian Counselling Centers in the greater Vancouver area, soliciting volunteers for the study (Appendices B and C). The churches and Christian organizations were gleaned from Derksen's (1996) British Columbia Christian Resource Directory 1996/97. Second, an article was written for the June issue of Christian

Info News describing the study and appealing for participants. Third, display ads (Appendix D) were placed in the following periodicals: The Weekend Sun, The Christian Week, and Christian Info News. Several contributors heard of the study from Trinity Western University colleagues.

Volunteers were assessed for inclusion in the study through an initial telephone interview that attempted to determine if they met the inclusion criteria as delineated above and if they demonstrated willingness to complete the descriptive interview process. Three respondents had experienced sexual abuse within a religious institution and did not meet the qualifying standards. One individual met the inclusion measures but chose not to participate in the interview process. Another person was not a practising Christian. One candidate went through the interview process but had his data excluded from the thematic analysis because his spiritual experience did not include the presence of God and was only minimally sexual.

Data Collection

The most direct route to understanding a phenomenon for an existential-phenomenological researcher is to confront it "by contacting the phenomenon as people experience it" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 57). According to Osborne (1990), "The interview is the most common procedure for data gathering" (p. 84). The aim of the interview is to engage in theme-oriented dialogue with the co-researcher in order to "describe and understand the meaning of the central theme of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.49). Description and meaning are the levels of focus. Theory and explanation are unwanted.

Within this context the interview tends to be unstructured and open-ended. The one-on-one dialogue is constructed jointly by the investigator and co-investigator. The interviewer

attempts "to remain open to the presence of new and unexpected constituents in the description and does not shape the questions as tests of ready-made categories or schemes of interpretation" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 49). As a result the interview takes the form of a directed dialogue with gentle probes and active listening skills utilized by the interviewer to elicit contributors' responses as clearly and in as much detail as possible. Information about specific components of the interviews in this study as well as a brief introduction to the researcher are provided below.

The Researcher

As the principle researcher in this study, I am a Caucasian male from a lower middle-class background, raised in Western Canada in a conservative Christian home. At the time of the first data collection interviews I was 39 years of age. I was married in 1976 and completed my master's degree in Counselling Psychology in 1984. Since that time I have taught psychology courses at two Christian Liberal Arts Universities and have counselled in several counselling centers. Teaching 400 level Human Sexuality courses and counselling clients with issues such as sexual abuse, sexual dysfunctions, sexual addictions, and sexual intimacy problems for the past 13 years has given me exposure to sexuality from various perspectives.

The Interviews

The interview process used in this study was informed by methods proposed by Colaizzi (1978) and Osborne (1990). There was a brief initial telephone assessment interview, an in-depth personal interview, plus two follow-up interviews for each participant. One participant had left the continent after the in-depth personal interview so correspondence was managed through E-mail and fax.

The initial telephone interview was to evaluate the suitability of potential participants

and to inform them regarding the purpose and nature of this study. Times were arranged for the in-depth interview for those participants who met the inclusion criteria. Before the extensive interview, a packet containing a letter of information about the study (Appendix E) and an ethical consent form (Appendix F) was forwarded to each participant.

The in-depth personal interviews took place in my private counselling office or in other counselling agencies. These interviews varied in length from 60 to 90 minutes and were devoted to data collection. All interviews were audio-recorded. The interviewing process commenced in the spring and terminated in the fall of 1996. The in-depth interview was developed along the parameters of orientation and questioning.

Orientation: The initial phase of the interview was used to establish rapport and inform the participant about the nature of the research and confidentiality issues. The orientation statements follow:

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me about your profound experiences that are simultaneously sexual and spiritual. I recognize the private nature of these subjects, so I respect your courage to be vulnerable with me.

The purpose of this study is to give practising Christians a voice in describing intense experiences that are jointly sexual and spiritual. This study also intends to discover events that facilitated these profound encounters and to draw out the aftereffects of such experiences.

I am meeting with people to gain understanding of the nature of these mysterious experiences and to find out what has actually worked to bring the sexual and spiritual together as part of the same experience. This information could aid individuals and couples understand more about human potential and human intimacy.

Counsellors, educators, and clergy might gain direction for counselling and further research. Dialogue that might diminish dualism and divisive thinking may also occur due to this research.

I want to assure you that this information is confidential. The taped interview will only be known as a number, and following the study it will be erased. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without prejudice of any kind.

The co-researcher was invited to ask any questions.

Questioning: The main interview question was the impetus for the data collection process. The initial statement was:

Please think back to a time or times when you had a profound experience when the terms sexual and spiritual accurately describe that human event. (Pause) Please describe as fully as you can your experience of this sexual and spiritual encounter.

What was it like for you?

Open-ended questions (e.g., What were you feeling? How did you experience the presence of God? How was this experience different? What did you experience?), probes, empathy, and active listening skills facilitated further elucidation of participants' experiences. In addition, during the in-depth interview the following questions were asked:

--What happened that brought about this sexual and spiritual experience? What specific events led up to those moments when you felt spiritually and sexually connected?

--What were the effects of these meaningful connections between sexuality and spirituality for you? What were the effects on your relationships?

Again I responded to the participants by reflective statements and encouraging them to elaborate on their descriptions.

The third interview occurred after each participant received and read his or her individual thematic analysis produced from the transcribed in-depth interview. The statements within each participant's transcript were analyzed to discover clusters of meaningful themes. Individual thematic analyses ranged from six to ten single-spaced typed pages and were mailed or faxed to each corresponding contributor. The second interview followed their review of their personal thematic analysis. Each co-researcher was asked the two questions recommended by Colaizzi (1978), "How do my descriptive results compare with your experience? and Have any aspects of your experience been omitted?" (p. 62). Any corrections or additions were noted and formulated into the "exhaustive description" of themes and the "common structure."

The fourth interview was the second follow-up consultation. Prior to this interview, participants were given the opportunity to review the results of the research to that point. This final consultation enabled the participants to validate the description of themes that were revealed and the essential structures that emerged through data analysis. The two questions recommended by Colaizzi (1978) (see above) were posed and participants' feedback was recorded on note paper. The follow-up interviews ranged from twenty minutes to forty minutes.

Data Analysis

The interview data or protocols were interpreted phenomenologically using the descriptive methods outlined by Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975). Structuring the analysis of the interview data was also informed by Osborne (1990) and Polkinghorne (1989). The goal

of phenomenological data analysis is to categorize the investigated experience into meaningful themes that describe and define the essential structure of the phenomenon.

The procedural steps described by Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975) that are employed in this research are applied below. Several additional validity checks are also included in the following:

Step 1: Subsequent to the transcription of all the tapes of the in-depth interviews, the protocols were read in their entirety to "acquire a feeling for them" (Colaizzi, p.59). Attempts were made to recall nuances of verbal expression and the feelings exhibited by the contributor as each transcript was read and reread.

Step 2: Once a sense of the whole had been constructed for the data from the in-depth interviews, phrases and sentences that directly pertained to the experience of profound sexual and spiritual encounters were extracted. This process is referred to as "extracting significant statements" (Colaizzi, p. 59).

Step 3: Next, the meaning or theme(s) of each pertinent statement from each protocol was interpreted and extracted. According to Colaizzi creating meaningful statements that reflect the essential point of each original statement is:

a precarious leap because, while moving beyond the protocol statements, the meanings ...arrive[d] at and formulate[d] should never sever all connection with the original protocols; [they] must discover and illuminate those meanings hidden in the various contexts ... in the original protocol. (p. 59)

Care was taken to focus on the emergence of a "deep structure of meaning," rather than just linguistic content (Osborne, 1990, p. 85).

Step 4: At this step I diverged from Colaizzi's procedure and included Giorgi's formulation.

Sentences of similar meaning were grouped together into meaning units for each protocol. The theme that emerged from each group of statements was expressed in the researcher's words. Following the identification of each theme the contributor's own statements provided exemplification of that theme and demonstrated the foundation of the particular theme. In this process a "situated structural description" or particular representation of the experience for each participant was developed. The situated structural description of the experience was written into a text, varying from six to ten pages, for each co-researcher. A different colored paper was used to photocopy each text for easier identification and then they were returned to the corresponding participant for validation and feedback. Undergoing this kind of analysis for each contributor "constitutes a within persons analysis" (Osborne, 1990, p. 85). This step parallels the third interview or first follow-up interview described above. Corrections and additions from each participant were used to modify the situated structural description of his or her experience.

Step 5: Once a "situated structural description" was established for each protocol, the aggregate of formulated meanings were organized into "clusters of themes" (Colaizzi, p. 59).

In this step there was an attempt to produce a set of general themes that were common to all of the co-researchers' protocols. Thirty-two original themes were collapsed into twenty-five theme clusters. The twenty-five themes were referred back to the original transcripts for validation.

Step 6: The results of the data analysis to this point were "integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic" (Colaizzi, p. 61). Formulation of the "exhaustive description" of the themes depended upon quotations and examples from participants' protocols. Co-researchers' voices described and defined the thematic richness of the profound

sexual and spiritual encounter. At this stage the themes were organized into the three major categories: Preconditions and Facilitating Events; Descriptive Themes of the Encounter; and Aftereffects. The themes were structured into a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Cochran, 1990).

Step 7: The researcher endeavored to "formulate the exhaustive description of the investigated phenomenon in as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible" (Colaizzi, p. 61). The attempt was made to synthesize the data analysis into a concise common story that illuminated the meaning and experience of profound sexual and spiritual connection for practising Christians.

Step 8: According to Colaizzi, the final step of the data analysis is to return the "fundamental structure" or common story of the investigated experience to the participants and interview them about the findings. Using the same validating questions as in the step 5 interview, participants were asked, "How do my descriptive results compare with your experience?" and "What aspects of your experience have I omitted?" Following Colaizzi's procedure, any relevant new data that emerged was "worked into the final product of the research" (p. 62). Although this concluded the steps of phenomenological research as proposed by Colaizzi and Giorgi, further validity checks were implemented and are discussed in the validity section.

Ethical Considerations

Several steps were taken by the researcher to ensure that this study was carried out with participants' informed consent and conducted in an ethical manner. All of these procedures were evaluated and sanctioned by the University of British Columbia's Ethical Review

Committee. First, following the initial telephone assessment an informative letter discussing the purpose and format of the study was sent to each participant (Appendix E). Second, a consent form (Appendix F) was included in the mailing and was signed by the participants prior to the in-depth interview. Third, the in-depth interview began with reviewing the purpose and format of the study by reading the "orientation statements" described above. Fourth, each participant was kept informed about the data collection process--what would happen next--and questions were invited and answered. Fifth, clarifications and corrections to the demographic profile of each participant were accepted as requested. Sixth, each participant received a first-name pseudonym for identification in the write-up of the study.

Reliability and Validity

According to Wertz (1986), considerations of reliability and validity begin by acknowledging that phenomenological research methodology is founded upon different metatheoretical assumptions than those used in natural science. Natural science is explanatory science while existential-phenomenological research is descriptive science (Giorgi, 1992). The goals of natural science are objectivity, explanation, control, prediction, and statistical generalizability. Phenomenological research aims to elucidate meaning and understanding of human existence from an individual's perspective. It strives for empathic generalizability. Do the meaningful themes analyzed from the research resonate with and clarify another's experience of the phenomenon?

Reliability

Reliability to the phenomenological researcher is based on the understanding that human perception is perspectival and contextual (Kvale, 1994; Osborne, 1990). Although several interpretive perspectives may be directed toward a phenomenon, reliability or sameness can come forth out of the variability and relativity of human perception. Osborne reiterates, "Different interviewers of different co-researchers produce situations which are never repeatable but which provide multiple perspectives which can lead to a unified description of a shared phenomenon" (p. 87). Since phenomenological research focuses on meaning rather than facts, intersubjective agreement or general consensus regarding the essence of an experience with other researchers is possible.

Reliability in this study was addressed in two ways. Internal reliability, the degree to which several researchers can agree about the classifications of previously generated constructs, was met through the review of the transcripts and confirmation of the theme descriptions by the researcher's supervisor. External reliability, the degree to which independent researchers would generate the same constructs with the same data, was addressed by involvement of an independent phenomenological researcher. He reviewed the meaningful statements extracted from all the protocols and compared them to the identified themes and common structure of the principle researcher. Since each contributor's statements were printed on a different colored paper, it was possible to analyze individual thematic reliability as well as group thematic reliability. Very high intersubjective reliability—91%—was discovered.

Because the unique characteristics of the participants and the researcher in this study cannot be replicated, it is not known whether other researchers would discover identical results

using different but similar data. However, replication may be facilitated by understanding the theoretical premises and constructs that inform the research and by following the detailed description of the research methodology.

Validity

Validity pertains to whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate and the extent to which observations reflect the phenomenon of interest. Phenomenological researchers regard validity in several forms. Kvale (1994) suggests that validation is built into the research process with "continual checks of the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of the findings" (p. 168). Polkinghorne (1989) approaches validity "as a conclusion that inspires confidence because the argument in support of it has been persuasive" (p. 57). Osborne (1990) also equates phenomenological validity with the coherence and internal consistency of the researcher's interpretations of the data.

Although the assessment of validity in phenomenological research is quite subjective, Osborne (1990) delineates several ways to assess the validity of a phenomenological researcher's interpretations. First, "by bracketing his/her orientation to the phenomenon and carefully describing the procedure and data analysis, the researcher provides the reader with the opportunity to understand his/her interpretations of the data" (p. 87). The details of the procedure for this study are described above and the researcher's bracketing can be found in Appendix A.

Second, internal validity can be addressed by checking the researcher's interpretations for accuracy with the co-researchers throughout the collection and interpretation stages of the

research (Osborne, 1990). In this study there was formal involvement of the participants in the data analysis process on two occasions: the initial follow-up interview of individual "situated" thematic descriptions and the concluding interview assessing goodness of fit of the common structure of the sexual and spiritual encounter. All of the co-researchers validated the "situated" and common descriptive themes.

Third, external validity of the interpreted structure may be assessed by having other individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, but are not in the study, check the results (Osborne, 1990; Shapiro, 1986). A woman who had declined to be part of the original study of profound sexual and spiritual experience, accepted the opportunity to compare the researcher's thematic structure of the encounter with her experience. She discovered and affirmed that the researcher's interpretation strongly resonated with her experience of the phenomenon.

Generalizability of the Results

Although human-science practitioners emphasize shifting from universal generalizable knowledge to local contextual knowledge (Kvale, 1994), some comments about applying the results of this study across groups are warranted. First, the participant group was small (only ten participants) and somewhat homogeneous. Participants came from only Protestant Christian Churches and by-in-large were more educated than average. Whether this group adequately represents practising Christians who have experienced profound sexual and spiritual connection can be questioned. On the other hand, there were five men and five women involved in the study. It may be concluded that the effects of gender variability are mitigated due to the balanced proportion of men and women. Also, although other Christian

churches are not represented, five Protestant denominations produced contributors for this study. Therefore, it could be argued that the heterogeneity of these participants supports possibility of generalizing the results of this study.

Second, the results were based on the self-reports of participants and thus were dependent on memory and willingness to divulge relevant information. However, there were several opportunities to clarify and add information of the sexual and spiritual experience. While participants did ask how their experience compared with others' experience during the interview, their affirmation of the common structure of themes demonstrated the relevance of the data revealed.

Third, the reports of the participants were probably influenced by the researcher and the research process. While the contextualized atmosphere of phenomenological research is acknowledged, this factor effects generalizability of results. On the other hand, the researcher's history of teaching and counselling issues germane to human sexuality within a Christian context supports the claims in this study and the possibility of generalizing results. Colaizzi (1978) affirms this by stating that the phenomenological researcher "will discover that understanding the investigated phenomenon qualifies exquisitely as a criterion for research knowledge" (p. 56).

To summarize the limitations of phenomenological research and this study, it must be remembered that "there is no absolute interpretation of the data" (Osborne, 1990, p. 87). Readers, and others who have experienced the phenomenon, will ultimately judge whether the descriptive interpretation of the researcher is defended.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The results chapter includes: demographics and brief profiles of the ten participants; identification and clustering of the twenty-five common descriptive themes that emerged from the data analysis; an "exhaustive description" of the twenty-five themes; and a fundamental structure or common story of the participants' experience of their profound sexual and spiritual encounter.

The Participants

The ten practising Christians who comprised the participant group for this study were five women and five men. The ages given for the contributors were accurate at the time of the first interview and ranged from 36 to 65 years with a mean age of 45 years. One woman was single and experienced the majority of her sexual and spiritual encounters alone with God. The rest of the contributors were heterosexually married for an average of 17.25 years and related experiences of sexual and spiritual connection that occurred within their marriages. Two of the co-researchers are husband and wife. Eight of the married participants have children. The practising Christians attended the following Protestant churches: Vineyard (3), Baptist (3), Interdenominational (2), Pentecostal (1), and Brethern (1). The racial make-up of this group included nine Caucasians and one African-American. All of the participants had completed High School and some college credits; four had graduate degrees. Occupations of the co-researchers included two pastors, two counsellors, a self-employed couple, an engineer, a secretary, an educator, and a house-wife. Nine of the participants lived in lower British Columbia, while one lived in Manitoba. According to the order of the interviews, a brief

introduction to each contributor follows.

"Patty": Counsellor, age 51, married 29 years with 3 children.

Although Patty has had a number of experiences where she felt God's presence during sexual relations with her husband, she pointed to a particularly significant sexual and spiritual encounter that occurred after Christmas in 1993. She felt emotionally and sexually flat and, while having sex with her husband, prayed that God would light the fire in their marriage. She heard God telling her of her resentment and anger she harbored against her husband. As Patty let go of her barriers to intimacy, she experienced a thorough emotional cleansing, heightened pleasure in orgasm, and deep connection with God and her mate. Patty recounted rich descriptions of the profound encounter. This event was perceived as a pivotal, healing time in their marriage.

"Yawna" : Secretary, age 41, married 15 years with 2 children.

This participant's experience was not so much an event as it was a life-changing process. Raised in Sweden, Yawna had a healthy view of sexuality--she accepted her body and could talk openly and joyfully about sex. She described herself as having "strong feelings about sex;" she felt very sexual and appreciated this aspect of her life. During this time of her life she also experienced a "very good, personal relationship with God." When she came to Canada at 25 years of age, she had pre-marital sex. This was an "awful" experience and caused her to feel extremely guilty for breaking her Christian morality. To atone for her wrong she radically shifted her concept of her sexuality and put herself through a sort of penance by denying her sexual self.

Yawna married the person she "fornicated" with and felt undeserving of sexual satisfaction. Over time she developed severe anxiety and panic attacks. She was hospitalized

several times. At the same time her spiritual life died. She had no hunger or passion for God. In her words her sexual life and spiritual life were "ruined", "sick", and "dead."

Yawna went to a Christian counselor to help her deal with her panic attacks. Eventually the counselor lead her to explore her sexuality. Facing her fear and guilt regarding sex freed her of her anxiety and enabled her to connect sexually and spiritually. As she confronted the fear of her sexual self she trusted herself to let go and experience passion in her sexuality and spirituality. Her celebration of sexuality was evidenced in her ability to enjoy sex with her husband and her desire to explore and long for deeper intimacy. Her spirituality now allows her to explore God and passionately desire to know Him deeply. Yawna believes this simultaneous rejuvenation of her sexuality and spirituality was a "miracle."

"Bill" : Pastor, age 55, married for 25 years with 2 children.

Bill does not point to one significant encounter as being sexual and spiritual. Rather, he pointed to a number of sexually intimate occasions with his wife when they both experienced the presence of God. When they prepared for intimacy by reconciling their differences, having a devotional time with God prior to sex, and focusing on enhancing the setting, God blessed them with His participation during the encounter.

Pastor Bill described the union as profoundly spiritual and relinquishing. His marriage, ministry, and relationships to other parts of life was also effected by this meaningful union. Bill contributed a theological understanding of salvation in light of his sexual and spiritual experience.

"Orlanda" : Counsellor, age 65, single, no children.

This participant presented a description of spiritual and sexual connection that was unique because she was single and perceived her experiences occurring between her and God,

rather than with another human. Although she understood her sexual and spiritual experience as a maturing process, she pointed to specific events that stand out within her development.

Until she was 50 years of age, Orlanda lived her life as a transsexual and had numerous homosexual relationships. The first profound event occurred one morning following sex with her first committed partner--another woman. The "powerful" sexual and emotional experience with this woman opened her up to the spiritual dimension as she witnessed the visual and auditory presence of Christ tenderly saying, "I am your lover. You won't receive me now, but someday you will." The second event happened when she was 50 and followed her conversion experience. Here she acknowledged God as her "lover" and experienced orgasmic connection with Him. Later as she read the Old Testament book of Hosea, a prophetic book that discusses the passionate and endearing relationship between God and His people who "whored" after other gods, Orlanda experienced God's passion physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The third experience was when she had a vision of God as her husband and she was His bride and felt "possessed" by Him. Finally she heard His "call to singleness" and believes He has given her the status of "virgin", or one who is new, emptied of previous sexual dysfunctions, yet filled with God's presence.

The accounts of sexual and spiritual connection given by this woman bear striking similarities to the ecstatic, erotic intimacy with God described by the mystics Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and John of the Cross.

"Gerry": Educator, age 36, married 6 years with two children.

Gerry had two significant experiences that encompassed both the sexual and spiritual domains. The first experience occurred in his twenties as a single man. He felt distraught and depressed, uncertain of who he was and what to pursue following graduate school. In the

midst of his anxiety and guilt he sought counselling. During therapy he was directed to visualize Christ on the cross and ask Him what he (Gerry) was doing to put Him there. God blessed him with profound intimacy, passionately affirming and accepting him with unconditional love. He was relieved of his critical self.

A second profound sexual and spiritual encounter took place with his wife, two years after they were married, while vacationing at Hawaii. During this occasion he experienced intense physical, emotional, and spiritual union with his wife and God. He was struck by the sense of wholeness, acceptance, love, intimacy, freedom, and emotional and physical arousal that were similarly realized through both the counselling and vacation experiences. The two experiences were deemed life-changing.

"Grey": Engineer, age 44, married nine years with no children.

The wedding night, the first time he experienced sexual intimacy with his wife, and other periodic encounters since that event were described by Grey as being both sexually and spiritually intimate. He was introduced to the understanding of God blessing the sexual union with His presence as a teenager and therefore expected to find God within this union. Being hurt in relationships as a young adult produced fear of intimacy. Grey found relief through prayer and being vulnerable with his wife. The sense of mystery, well-being, goodness, and being favored are prominent elements of his experience. He presented a fairly rational understanding and description of these meaningful encounters.

"Bobbie": Home-maker, age 44, married 15 years, four children.

Bobbie's history significantly influenced her sexual and spiritual comprehension. Born into a poor Black family, she remembered her parents fighting about sex. She heard her dad demand sex from her mom at night and command her to "open up." Mom painted a

disparaging picture of Black men, calling her father selfish and undisciplined. There was little affection demonstrated by her parents and no education about sexuality. She learned that child birthing was extremely painful from her mother. As her family was "very religious," she referred to herself as a "goodie two shoes."

Bobbie grew up believing that sexual pleasure was only for self-centered Black men, that love was not part of intimacy, that sex created life but the pain of child bearing was the negative price to pay for such an experience. As a young adult she had a conversion experience and married a white man. A virgin until marriage, she could only gain orgasm through manual stimulation. She suffered from a form of vaginismus--a sexual dysfunction that made penetration of the vagina difficult. Intercourse was very painful and without pleasure. Her four children were all born through cesarean section. Bobbie's interpretation of her problem was that at unconscious and conscious levels she ingested her mother's attitudes and was afraid to "open up" physically and emotionally.

Although Bobbie experienced several "tender healing experiences" along the process of recovering sexual wholeness, it wasn't until she was forced to face her fears, distrust, and racial self-rejection that she discovered the fullness of intimacy. As the truth was revealed to her about four months prior to our interview, God encouraged her to "open up" and she was able to celebrate the "ecstatic pleasure" of intercourse and intimacy with her husband and God. This "miracle" revolutionized her being and has promoted frequent experiences of sexual and spiritual connection.

"Cherry": Self-employed, age 36, married 18 years, four children.

Cherry and her husband Will have experienced sexual and spiritual connection simultaneously as a couple. While other couples have experienced this profound encounter

together, this was the only couple who was available or volunteered to contribute to this study.

Cherry has encountered a number of profound experiences that were both sexual and spiritual. She choose to describe three specific meaningful experiences: an event that occurred a month previous to the interview, another occasion followed a Choices seminar about six months prior, and the third incident preceded the above happenings by about four years. The sexual and spiritual connections were experienced as very unifying, cleansing, emotionally and physically arousing, freeing, transcendent, healing, spontaneous, acutely focusing, deeply passionate, empowering, and life-changing. All of her sexual and spiritual experiences occurred with her husband and involved divine presence.

"Will": Self-employed, age 39, married 18 years, four children.

Will works with his wife in business, participates in a ministry to single mothers, and lay counsels with couples. He believes that as he has become more open to God's loving desire to relate to him and give direction to his life, God has blessed him with being present in sexual intimacy with his wife. Will's sexual and spiritual experiences emphasized the unity, wholeness, healing, passionate understanding, arousal, goodness, blessedness, and equality he appreciates with his wife. God being involved in their sexual intimacy made sound theological sense to him and these periodic and profound experiences motivate him to encourage other couples to deeper levels of intimacy.

"Peter": Pastor, age 41, married 18 years, one child.

Peter is an ordained minister who admitted that his Catholic back-ground and reading of the Christian mystics influenced his understanding of passion directed Godward and towards humans. He described two dimensions of the sexual and spiritual connection as they related to his experience. First, he occasionally experiences the linking of sexual and spiritual

energies with his wife. These incidents are experienced as a couple and are portrayed as a blissful, centered, relaxed state of sacred union that is somewhat paradoxical. The other occasions where he recognized joint spiritual and sexual arousal was in a parallel relationship between being the instrument of God's word in public, pastoral ministry followed by increased sexual appetite. As he experienced union with God through the Holy Spirit in pastoral ministry by having "penetrated" and "impregnated" his audience with God's truth, his sexual desire was peaked. His hunger for physical union mirrored his intimate connection with God.

THE THEMES

The following twenty-five themes were identified in the data analysis as being common for all participants. The participants are not necessarily equally represented in each thematic category. This is due to variance in salience of themes for different participants, and because some contributors were particularly articulate about certain themes. The thematic meanings that emerged were standard in each participant's experience and validated by all the co-researchers.

Clusters of Themes

The twenty-five themes drawn from the interviews are divided into three sections. Those themes occurring previous to the sexual and spiritual encounter, during the profound experience, and in the aftermath of the experience are grouped together. Within the sections the themes are ordered in the sequence that fits most of the co-researchers' experience. Many of the themes occur simultaneously and vary in ordering for the participants.

The initial phase, themes 1-8, contains the predisposing conditions and facilitating events that led participants to the profound sexual and spiritual encounter. Themes 9-19 make up the middle phase or the descriptive categories of the profound experience. The essence of the encounter is portrayed in this cluster. The final phase consists of themes 20-25. This denouement comprises categories that represent the aftereffects of the profound experience. Since the interview was conducted within Cochran's (1990) narrative format (a story including a beginning, a middle, and an end), there was little difficulty in clustering the themes into the three sections.

Three Phases of the Sexual and Spiritual Encounter

Phase I: Preconditions and Facilitating Events

1. Unsettled State
2. Revelation of Truth
3. Reconciliation through Communication, Confession, Forgiveness
4. Predisposing Beliefs and Expectations
5. Preceding Spiritual Event
6. Communion with God
7. State of Receptivity
8. Mental and Sensory Preparation

Phase II: Descriptive Themes of the Encounter

9. Sense of Wonder and Amazement
10. Emotional Cleansing
11. Evidence of God's Presence
12. Intense Union
13. Euphoria
14. Intense Physical Arousal
15. Transcendence
16. Holistic Involvement
17. Sense of Blessing and Favor
18. Ineffable Mystery
19. Sense of Sacredness and Worship

Phase III: Aftereffects

20. Transformation and Healing
21. Empowerment and Purpose
22. Passionate Awareness and Connection
23. Affirmation of Godly Beliefs
24. Great Gratefulness
25. Sense of Gender Equality

Exhaustive Description of Themes

Phase I: Preconditions and Facilitating Events

The sexual and spiritual encounter occurred within a context that set the stage for the experience. The initial phase consisted of pre-existing conditions that were largely comprised of states of mind or attitude and states of feeling that appeared to predispose the person for a sexual and spiritual experience. As well there were some specific events that served as facilitating incidents for connecting the sexual and spiritual domains among these contributors. Although there may be some semblance of order among the events, psychological states appeared to exist simultaneously. As much as possible the contributors' voices are used to define and describe the themes of Phase I.

1. Unsettled State

A precondition for linking sexuality and spirituality among the participants was an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual state of unsettledness. This troubled state was more prominent for some contributors than others, but nine participants sensed specifically

that something was not right and needed resolution. The unsettled state was revealed in several forms.

One manifestation of unsettledness was the experience of being incomplete and unfulfilled. An essential ingredient was missing in life. There was a sense of longing for more. People were yearning for something or someone to fill and complete them. Orlanda described her state as, "extreme emptiness, extreme loneliness, extreme brokenness." She said, "I just a longed for more; there were a lot of tears and there was a lot of incompleteness." Yawna stated, "I just longed to connect deeply." According to Cherry, when she experienced God actively ministering to her through prayer or healing, "We would always feel like we had to go make love and that would be the completion of the spiritual experience."

A sense of loss can lead to feeling alone or incomplete. Patty sensed the loss of closeness with her husband and the developmental losses of her children moving away as well as the loss of her virility through menopause. Just prior to the sexual intimacy that was part of her sexual and spiritual experience, she felt "flat--emotionally and sexually."

Another form of the unsettled state was the experience of negative emotions that needed resolution. Participants pointed to feelings of fatigue, confusion, restlessness, and resentment. These feelings often accompanied life transitions, such as marriage or career. Gerry identified his state as "feeling lost" and "dislocated." He was asking the existential questions: "What am I worth? What is the meaning of my life? Am I really an artist?" Concerned about the opinions of others, Gerry's confusion led to feelings of "self-hatred" and "self-criticism" that preceded a passionate spiritual experience with God. Describing his experience prior to a sexual and spiritual encounter with his wife he said, "We just wanted

each other because we had been so hard pushed. . . I was tired."

A precondition for Cherry was feeling "really stressed out and there was a lot of things coming down and I felt no peace in my heart. I felt restless." She went on to state, "There were circumstances that were out of my control and they were stressing me out." Her husband Will was less specific but recalled, "Emotionally...I think there was ministry over something that had been negative, because just in going back to that moment it seemed very healing."

Unsettled states that were characterized by negative emotions and that blocked intimate connection were often rooted in an unresolved issue within the relationship. Pastor Bill stated, "At times there are areas that block our relationship--either I have hurt her or something has come up." He went on to remember how his wife had been angry towards him for dragging her into an area of his work that she did not desire involvement. In his words, "And then I became aware of it and I didn't know how to handle it and during all of that time, our physical relationship, our sexual relationship was 'zippo'." Patty recalled how in her unsettled state God revealed to her, "How I was hindering our marriage with anger."

Finally the unsettled state was shaped by the experiences of guilt and fear. Guilt and fear were significant inhibitors to sexual and spiritual freedom and passion. Christians are influenced by a dualism and strict sexual standards that often promote guilt. Yawna expressed how she handled her sexual guilt: "I was going to show God that I felt bad by denying myself sex and not enjoying it and making sure that nobody thought I was sexually attractive." Fear of intimacy often joined guilt's hurdle toward passion. This woman developed severe panic attacks and could not discuss sex: "I was afraid of myself--that I would start to enjoy it (sex) again....I was afraid that anybody would see me as a sexual

person." Yawna's solution to her sexual guilt--depriving herself of passion--became the problem. From her perspective, "This was my way of telling God, 'I'm so sorry for what I did.' But it had the opposite effect. It ruined my spiritual life and it ruined my sexual life."

Grey discussed how he feared intimacy before he was married. In his words, "I had a lot of fear of intimacy." He didn't get married until he was 34 and according to him his fear of intimacy stemmed from: "I had dated a lot of women.... Having a level of physical intimacy and then getting dumped took away any self-confidence that I would be desired in that area, so there was a lot of fear for me."

Hurt from past relationships also created anxiety that impeded intimacy. Bobbie's family background of a sexually demanding, selfish, unaffectionate father, and a sexually repressive mother who disparaged men and the pain of child birth distorted her orientation toward sexual intimacy. She closed herself sexually. She expressed, "I was denying myself that area toward my husband because I didn't want to open up in that way sexually....I'm holding back sexual satisfaction...A total fear of letting go." Bobbie felt much shame and self-rejection about her sexuality and her Black racial status just prior to her sexual and spiritual encounter.

The sense of incompleteness created a longing for wholeness or connection at a deep level. Feelings of unrest, stress, resentment, and confusion promoted attempts to resolve these undesirable states. Guilt and fear were barriers to intimacy. The dynamics of the unsettled state were a precondition experienced by these contributors that motivated them to seek resolution and restitution. Moving away from the unsettled state, they discovered sexual and spiritual connection.

2. Revelation of Truth (facilitating event)

An event identified by five of the participants (and confirmed by the others) that facilitated the sexual and spiritual connection was the revelation of a truth that was hidden or repressed. Revelation and acceptance of the facts about themselves or their relationship promoted clearing of barriers that impeded connection. Recognizing and facing fears enabled these participants to make changes in their attitudes, feelings and behavior.

Accepting the truth engendered self-awareness that freed the participant from the distortions and limitations of his or her past. This event was psychologically and spiritually freeing and paralleled the biblical words of Jesus Christ, "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Often gaining truth was fostered by counsellors or trusted friends in an experience of vulnerability and risk. Bobbie went to a "Choices" seminar for a week. At this seminar she revealed her fears and beliefs and forced herself to be deeply honest. In her words she "laid out her dirty laundry." This "letting go" was instrumental in freeing herself to be passionate and intimate. She stated:

I went through this seminar and they were talking about accepting yourself for how God created you and loving yourself, getting to the root of loving yourself...And having other men getting to know me over this five day process and I'm saying, "Yeah, I'm going to give a hundred percent here and let these people know exactly what I've been through, exactly what I think of men, exactly what I think men think of me, exactly what I think about my blackness, the prejudice, the barriers.

Counsellors at the seminar confronted her so Bobbie decided to "talk from the heart." As she bared her soul she heard God speak to her, "You are a sexual being. I made you to have

pleasure and enjoyment." The poignancy of the truth was:

like a revelation to me. It illuminated me. It enlightened me, and it was like my whole self changed and it was like I am strong, because when I went there I was totally weak. My weaknesses were all exposed.

Exposing her true beliefs and feelings freed her to relinquish the past distortions gained from her family.

Yawna did not want to face her sexuality and thus maintained a distorted picture of herself and her sexual and spiritual feelings. Hiding behind her guilt and fears kept her sexually and spiritually deprived. The sensitive, yet persistent, encouragement of her counsellor enabled her to discover her real self in order to overcome her anxiety. She described it this way:

We didn't start off with sex right away. . . I was terrified. Then we dealt with that incident [sex before marriage]. I think it was just him pushing me to talk about it, I think it was overcoming this hiding behind this 'gimp.' It had become a way of protection and a security blanket and in a funny way, it became something to hang onto and blame everything in my life on that 'gimp'. And I didn't want to take control of my sexuality and when he pushed me to look at that side of my life, I realized there was a deep longing there.

In facing the truth about her sexuality, she discovered yearning for sexual and spiritual connection and changed her behavior.

Grey was fearful of physical intimacy before his wedding night. He faced his fears with his wife by admitting them to her and discovering that in this process they evaporated. He stated:

I could be the best friend for any woman but I was afraid of any physical intimacy. I think some of the reason for that is being hurt in relationships prior to that or just having a woman friend in younger years push it on me and it scared the heck out of me... Talking lowered my inhibitions. Talking about what we were looking forward to, what our fears were in the past and how we got to where we are now.

By honestly examining his fears Grey facilitated the connection of his sexuality and spirituality on his wedding night.

Cherry recalled an occasion at a conference where someone told the audience that, "Somebody here has been really wounded by a sexual intercourse experience and it was before they were married and they felt totally violated." Cherry had experienced pre-marital sex with her husband and had felt uncomfortable with it, but hadn't realized how hurt and violated she really felt. She also had experienced "great sex" with her husband throughout her marriage, but both of them thought there was "something more" for her to experience sexually. She explained:

Like sex wasn't good every time. And so there was this "word" (revelation) and I just started to cry and I knew that was me and it was weird because I never thought Will violated me...and it was weird because I realized there was this little bit of wall, in my heart, towards him.

The truth revealed to her and passed on to her husband provoked sexual freedom and fullness that was never experienced previously.

Although counsellors and intimate friends were used to reveal freeing truth to people, other participants described how God pointed out specific facts about them that were hidden. Patty recounted how, while praying to God to ignite passion in her marriage, "God

began talking to me and He was telling me my sins. He was saying you've done this and this to hurt [your husband]. With your anger, you've held him at a distance." She admitted, "I had been lying to what the Lord spoke to me about, so the light came on." This revelation facilitated reconnection. Orlanda, in a desperate position of suicide, heard God relate to her the reality of her life:

The mourning, the loss of my gender identity, the loss of my mother, the immediate entering into rescuing women and being that to them which I could never be and trying so desperately to be wanted, needed, accepted.

Orlanda recognized her helpless state and succumbed to the "higher power" that enabled her to free herself to experience spiritual and sexual connection with God.

The revealing nature of truth promoted an authentic state where the fullness of sexual and spiritual connection could take place. Accepting the truth freed each person to experience awareness and relationship with self, another, and with God.

3. Reconciliation through Communication, Confession & Forgiveness

The experience of sexual and spiritual connection was preceded by an attempt to remove the obstacles to intimacy. The action of reconciliation, originally a theological term, served to change the significance of the deeds of the past. In biblical theology, human sin created a barrier between humans and God. Christ's death satisfied the demands of God and now people can again have a proper relationship, or be reconciled, with God. In human experience, reconciliation re-establishes connection between people by making things right.

The process of removing barriers to intimacy through reconciliation required honest communication. More specifically it involved admission of guilt or wrong doing--personal

acceptance of one's contribution to the blockage, confession of wrong or honest expression of personal fears, and requesting and experiencing forgiveness. Forgiveness was key to the experience. Essentially through forgiveness one comes to recognize the humanity of the other and "disapprove of one's disapproval of the other." The experience of forgiveness by the co-researchers in this study was described as liberating and one of the most significant facilitators of sexual and spiritual connection. Through the process of reconciliation and forgiveness there was acceptance of self, acceptance of the other, acceptance of God, and freedom from the embeddedness of the past. There was a sense of relational renewal and hope.

Patty described her barrier with her husband as a "wall between my husband and myself because of my anger and resentment." God had revealed her "sins toward (her husband)" and she:

told (her husband) all of those things, right afterwards, and I asked him to forgive me for those things and made a commitment to change those things in my life and that brought a lot of healing.

When she confessed and felt forgiven, she experienced "relinquishment" and a powerful sexual and spiritual experience.

Through counselling Yawna was forced to deal with her fear of sex, fear of herself, fear of her husband, and fear of God. The guilt of her fornication debilitated her and promoted panic attacks. She states, "I started realizing that my panic attacks were kind of connected with my sexuality and of putting myself down all the time." Yawna believed she, "had to change and the thing that really freed me was getting rid of this past." As she did this she experienced:

More of a satisfactory relationship with God--a more deep love for Him, and a deeper understanding of His forgiveness from my past and also thankfulness to Him that He sent this counselor into my life.

The experience of forgiveness brought reconciliation to her sexual and spiritual relationships.

Peter described how forgiveness was key in removing the blocks to intimacy and restoring spiritual and sexual connection:

The only way we get reconnected is that we have forgiven each other--talked about it first and then forgive each other. And I also find that often times the greatest degree of intimacy comes after a time of conflict and then resolution and the forgiveness.

Peter narrated how he and his wife handled a recent conflict:

This sense of being honest and finally confessing to each other and opening to each other and really letting down our guard and all of the defense and anger. . . I remember as we went home she said to me, 'It was if a big, heavy burden had rolled off my shoulders. Now that evening, I think we had probably one of the most, in recent times, pleasurable experiences as far as the sexual relationship is concerned. We truly enjoyed the interaction with each other and then relaxed in each others' presence. . . It was spiritual because we had experienced a sense of forgiveness and renewal and a sense of peace came in. There was no sense of guilt, no fear, no accusation because we were in Christ again--Romans 6.

It is noteworthy that the reconciliation process not only cleared the pathway between humans, it also re-connected them to God.

The initial experience of sexual and spiritual connection for Cherry occurred after

she disclosed to her husband Will that she had felt violated by him when they had pre-marital intercourse:

I basically would not have had sex, you know, before I got married if he hadn't really initiated and encouraged that and so (I said to him) that I felt violated by him. That was really hard for me to say to him because he has been this awesome husband, you know taking care of me, and so this happened so many years before, why is this significant now. I couldn't understand it. I just knew that it was. And he just cried and said you are right and apologized and just his crying and his repentance broke something in meand since it has been completely gone....it was just swoosh out of my heart as we were laying in bed and it just totally, radically changed so much in our sex life. When we made love that night, God came so powerfully and it was like God gave me a new experience.

The experience healed and revolutionized her ability to be sexually free with Will. Since that incident of reconciliation there was openness and sexual freedom that was never experienced previously.

When Bobbie had her second child she went through an experience of "letting go" in the hospital. She realized she needed to forgive her father and mother for the negative contributions they made to her attitudes about sexual intimacy. Her process of reconciliation was recounted as follows:

I was at Children's Hospital in Vancouver. I'm lying there and I guess I was able to stop all the business of life and it's like all of a sudden I started to see my dad in a totally different light. I actually had to see my dad for who he was--that God created him and I had to forgive him for not being a father to me. I had to forgive him for

the image that he had affirmed of Black men... So I had to forgive myself, forgive my dad, forgive my mom for putting that in my mind, forgive my mom for treating my dad that way. So this whole healing thing took place.

Although this event was several years previous to her ultimate sexual and spiritual turning point, she saw it as a necessary and contributing event toward sexual and spiritual wholeness.

Resolving issues within a relationship cleared the pathway toward sexual and spiritual closeness. Although the following contributors did not use the terms confession and forgiveness in their disclosures, it was apparent that they pursued relational acceptance before they engaged in sexual connection. Confession and forgiveness could very well be part of that experience. Grey found that an important facilitator of profound intimacy followed a time of working through problems. In his words:

Now if its something that the two of us need to put aside because it might be something in our relationship then of course we need to talk about it first. I personally just can't go to bed and want sexual intimacy with my wife if things aren't taken care of beforehand. I mean, we have to be in a good relationship.

Will described the process of working out relational difficulties prior to sexual intimacy in a similar way:

We would not enter love making if we had some kind of a barrier between us. I really can't stand having something between us and she can't either, but I really kind of doggedly pursue that. And so if there is something that's not right and even if she senses that I'm just in a raw physical sense that I need some kind of encouragement and release and pleasure and she want to serve me, if there was anything that was

between us we would still work that out beforehand as kind of a talking through kind of thing.

Peter believed that sincere communication with his wife promoted understanding and created a pathway toward sexual and spiritual connection. He stated, "I've always thought that the best form of foreplay is communication." Direct communication about work, parenting, and especially about relational issues was the best way to prepare for intimacy in his view.

Orlanda's experience of sexual and spiritual connection was between her and God. She pointed to her conversion experience as a facilitating event that enabled her to feel forgiven of her past and reconciled to God. This was a turning point in her life and promotes her to seek a new sexual and spiritual identity.

Honest communication and the experience of confession and forgiveness brought reconciliation to relationships and cleared the road for a profound sexual and spiritual experience. Restoration of closeness and understanding freed the participants to fully bond.

4. Predisposing Beliefs and Expectations

Assumptions that incorporated a holistic view about linking the physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual components of human nature and human intimacy predicated the possibility of experiencing sexual and spiritual connection. In some instances education and learning about God's design for sexual oneness preceded the experience. When the sexual and spiritual encounter occurred it was understood and justified as being part of God's design. In other cases, the experience confirmed that sexuality and spirituality were linked in a meaningful, mysterious way. It was as though the experience confirmed a hunch or

enlightened the participant as to how the connection occurred; there was some predisposing belief that made sense of the experience. Although only six of the co-researchers specifically stated their assumptive biases, the researcher sensed that each participant had a foundation for understanding and interpreting his or her experience.

There were also expectant attitudes revealed among these contributors. Participants expected that their spouse could meet part of their need for fulfillment. They anticipated that sexual intimacy within God's design could facilitate fullness or healing for their relationships.

Reviewing Peter's world view about God, relationships, and spiritual experience provides a foundational precondition for relating sexual and spiritual experience. Peter's beliefs were:

1) God is sexual and fundamentally relational.

I don't believe a theology of God can exist apart from the concept of relationships. I believe in some ways sex and intimacy reflect the pre-creation experience that the Trinity enjoyed from eternity. I believe God is a sexual being and so dealing with that means you're touching God, which means you are going to be aroused.

2) God is present in sexual intimacy within marriage.

I recognize God in almost everything and I'm not talking about pantheism or panentheism, God is with me and in me and if I do it with integrity, what ever it might be, the presence of God goes with me. I believe that God has ordained marriage. He may not even be present in the act of a sexual relationship unless it takes place within a committed relationship.

3) Spiritual experiences are a gift from God and if they happen enjoy them but never seek them.

We should seek God and if God gives us an experience of whatever sort fine; but don't seek it, that's a twisting of our relationship with God and for me to seek it with my wife would be a gross twisting of my relationship with her.

According to Peter, God is not only sexual and involved in human intimacy, He blesses humans occasionally with profound experiences. These divine encounters came unexpectedly and should not be prescribed or sought after, but they should be accepted and celebrated as a gift from God.

Other contributors did not detail their beliefs as specifically as Peter, but their assumptions clearly influenced their experience. Cherry's revealing description follows:

It almost sounds heretical maybe; sometimes I do look at Will and its like, "You are Jesus to me." I said that to him because when I need to be ministered to he does minister with such love and care like I think Jesus would, if Jesus were in the flesh. And because I do look at the husband and wife relationship as the closest relationship, if it is really proper and loving, it is the most intimate thing like Christ and the church; its the bride and the bridegroom and because we believe this we had some significant spiritual experiences.

Her beliefs about the marriage relationship representing Christ and the Church predisposed her to have sexual and spiritual encounters with her husband.

Will, Cherry's husband, also explained how his holistic view of intimacy followed God's design:

It's probably just the more we are made with the spirit as well as our emotions and

our physical body and I guess in those unique times when we manage to bring all three together it's more of the way we were designed to function and so I guess it figures that those would be very special times....It's an example of Christ and the Church so to really get out all of it that we can it's almost an act of worship. It's magnifying God in who He is and His good creation.

The teaching that Grey received as a young man about the role of sexuality in relationships--that God had designed it for intimacy and pleasure and that it was a picture of God's intimate relationship with His children (bride)--strongly impacted his views and attitude toward connecting sex to spirituality. He stated:

I've always had a sense of the connection between God and His people. I was taught in church youth group how good it was and how the man and wife marriage relationship represents, in an imperfect way, the relationship that we have with God as His bride. I had a teacher that taught me that sex was good, sex was fun in the right context and that it was to be saved for marriage. So with all that information and understanding, the wedding night for me was very spiritual and very physical and I had no problem bringing the two together or experiencing the two together.

Grey also experienced great anticipation prior to the significant event of consummating his marriage vows to his wife by becoming sexually intimate.

I didn't expect that I would have this profound experience between spirituality and sexuality but I think another thing that paved a way for that experience was realizing that sex was for marriage and having a very healthy courting time. We had a really fun and intimate pre-marital courting time and there was a gradual move from being friends to becoming more intimate leading up to the marriage experience but we

drew a line of virginity for ourselves and said this is as far as we take it. This is what would honor God.

Other participants' accounts of their presuppositions were briefer. Bill referred to his experience as "the biblical union of 'one flesh.'" It was apparent that his understanding of biblical terms defined his experience. Gerry, the artist, stated:

I feel God fits into the picture of wholes in human orgasm and in the sexual experience and in the artist's moment of recognizing an integrated picture of their life in their work as a profound moment of truth.

Examining the assumptions and beliefs of those participants who outrightly articulate them is revealing. Their comments represent the biases that might predispose all of the contributors to have the experience of sexual and spiritual connection. The beliefs that are included certainly fit within the framework of a "Practicing Christian."

5. Preceding Spiritual Event

The experience of sexual and spiritual connection often followed in the path of a meaningful spiritual experience. The encounter with God seemed to awaken passions heaven-ward and human-ward. Specific interventions by God created more awareness of His existence and his involvement in human experience.

Some preceding spiritual events were dramatic and life-changing. On the third night of her seminar, after she had been confronted for her lack of self-acceptance and then affirmed for who she was, Bobbie experienced God revealing to her that she was to "Open up" and accept her sexual self and be strong and fearless. This was a dramatic encounter between God and herself.

That third night of the seminar when I was in bed meditating on these last three days, God said, "Yes. I want you to be strong. I want you to be fearless, and I want you to be sexually open." And it was like He said, "BE OPEN."

That event triggered the next step of self-acceptance and the acceptance of her sexuality. It was if her guilt and load of distorted self-image problems were relinquished and she was a new person. It was a life-changing experience. She explained:

I was weak in myself, I was weak from my past... But now I'm strong, now I'm fearless. I'm not afraid of what people think of me... I have complete self-acceptance....and I have no fear of myself and my sexuality...[I can] forget that tape that you heard your dad say to your mom, "I'm going to get you, so open up." ... [I can] open myself up.

Conversion to Christian faith was a spiritual experience that also tended to be pivotal. Orlanda experienced God's love and Him calling to her, "Come to me." In her words:

He says, "Come unto me." And if I can be sexual and spiritual at this point, whenever I read His word that said, 'Come unto me' it was a sexual/spiritual experience and it was a coming to Him. It was a culminating of that which He's already done for us (forgiveness) and my need of that... And when I read that, it is to that point I come--out of my bondage, sorrow and night. That's what I told Him, "Jesus I come to you."

It is significant to note that the word "come" in this context also referred to when a person "comes" or has an orgasm. Orlanda's conversion experience facilitated sexual and spiritual connection because afterwards she felt that nothing stood in the way of her relating to God.

At times the preceding spiritual experience was not a dramatic life-changing event. Rather the spiritual experience occurred regularly within particular contexts. Peter, a pastor, related how within 24 hours after being used by the Holy Spirit and preaching God's words, he has a deep sexual longing that facilitated sexual and spiritual connection with his wife:

When I'm ministering it is like an entering into the fluidity and the on-going expression of God. It is like some how I enter the stream of what He is trying to communicate... I can tell that I have entered His stream of thought for that person, for those people at that time, using the words through my own human vehicle to try and communicate what He is trying to communicate to them... Whenever I have an intense time of spiritual interaction... if I had profound experience in ministry with others then I will have, within 24 hours, my sexual appetite peaked and if at that time my wife and I have sex likely it is going to be that we feel that silence feeling.

Connection with God facilitated connection with his wife and God.

Other contributors were less specific about preceding spiritual events. Will described the sequence of the profound sexual and spiritual experience as following a spiritual encounter with God. When he met God through worship, ministry, or healing, he seemed to be more open to experience the fullness of sexual and spiritual intimacy. In his words:

Almost all of them have happened in the wake of another spiritual experience that was non-sexual, whether it was ministry or healing or in having a new revelation of where God was leading us.

Although the other practising Christians who participated in this study experienced some connection with God before the sexual and spiritual encounter, the four co-researchers

cited above recounted specific spiritual events that facilitated their profound experience.

6. Communion with God (facilitating event)

At first glance an occasion of communion with God might seem tantamount to the theme 'preceding spiritual event' described above. However, the previous theme, number five, delineates how participants experienced an intervening spiritual event that originated from God prior to the profound sexual and spiritual experience. God interrupted their lives on their behalf to demonstrate His power to change them. Theme number six, communion with God, defines an event in which the participants actively sought connection with the spiritual realm. Worship, devotion, and scripture reading were activities that facilitated connection with God. Meditation was another means of eliminating distractions and finding communion with God.

The most common form of communion with God practiced by the co-researchers in this study was prayer. Prayers to invoke God's presence or to request intercession on their behalf created communion and closeness with God and facilitated profound spiritual and sexual experience. Although all of the participants identified prayer as a facilitating event for the profound connection, none of them prayed for a sexual/spiritual experience.

Before and after sexual relations that were spiritual, Bill and his wife would pray together. Prayer before sex was not to ask God to be part of the sexual experience; rather, it was devotional prayer--prayer that engendered nearness and closeness to God. It was a form of worship that encouraged connection with God and with each other. The partner that initiated prayer and devotion time with God usually initiated sexual intimacy. Bill related:

For instance, we would have devotions and often times she would read the scripture

and lead in prayer or she would say, "Let me read the scripture tonight." and I would say, "Would you lead us in prayer too?" When I allowed her to take the initiative as far as the spiritual life was concerned, it effected both of us. And quite often I found that after we had gone through this kind of personal devotion (to God), she would take the initiative as far as the sexual relationship.

Prayer before sex became a regular practice for this couple. Sexual intimacy seemed incomplete without closeness to God.

Cherry and Will often prayed and invited God to be with them in the bedroom. According to Cherry, "We've probably more often invited God into the bedroom than any other place because we know that seems to be a very significant place that He always comes and honors." Frequently Will offered intercessory prayer for relief of a problem or to express closeness to God prior to sexual intimacy. From Will's perspective, "Usually though it (prayer) would be over an issue. It would be over something she was struggling with--praying, doing some intercession on her behalf." On one occasion Will prayed for God to come and fill her and while he was praying he verbally painted the following picture:

Just as he was stroking me, he was praying for me that God would come... And so as he's stroking me and arousing me, he's telling me this picture which brought sort of a peace to me...He saw me up on this mountain and it was a beautiful sunny day and there was a bit of snow, but it was sunny and there were patches of mossy, grassy areas....When he prayed, all of a sudden God gave him this picture.... and God just came like whoosh, just so powerfully and I was there and then he said lay down on the mossy grass and the wind is blowing....and I just went on top of him and he had this picture of me suddenly going from being on the grass and I was like this eagle.

Invoking God's presence cleared the way to deeper sexual communion.

Prayer about specific personal issues prior to sexual intimacy occurred with other contributors as well. Grey feared physical intimacy due to past experiences with broken relationships and so asked God to help him over these impediments. He prayed:

I don't know how you're going to do this God because I'm afraid here, but I want to be married and I want to experience love. I don't know how you are going to get me there and I don't think its possible. I think you can do it, but I don't have an idea about how its going to happen.

God helped him by relieving his fears and by presenting Himself during the sexual encounter.

Patty recognized that she didn't desire sex with her husband on the night of one of her sexual and spiritual experiences. While having sex with him she prayed, "that the Lord would light the fire again and put passion back in our marriage." Her prayer invited God's presence and intervention into their sexual experience.

Meditation and meditative prayer were also preceding events that demonstrated communion with God. Orlanda meditated with God as she retired at night in bed. In the "quietness of my own soul and in the quietness of my own bed, I share with God." As a single woman, Orlanda experienced connection with God through meditation:

I don't want to say that it happens every time that I think of Him when I'm in bed, but there's a satisfying within that often gives a (physical) expression of needing no one else.

Orlanda also shared that reading specific scriptures facilitated passionate connection with God. She stated:

After I became a Christian in 1981 I was going through the word of God and every time I tried to read Hosea it was a very sexually arousing experience.

Hosea is a prophetic book in the Old Testament that particularly discusses God's passionate and endearing relationship with His people. When His people pursue other gods He likens them to a whore chasing cheap sex.

Peter prepared himself to meet God by calming himself and centering on God. He described it this way:

I quiet my mind, my body, my emotions to the place where I can enter the silence... Although I am preparing myself for that, the silence actually, in many ways, enters me. It is like a breathing type of thing.

His meditative process was not verbal prayer, but he referred to this type of communion as "prayer of the heart."

Gerry experienced a form of sensory meditative prayer in a counselling encounter. He expressed that:

there was a moment in the session with the counselor that he said, "Now I want you to visualize Christ on the cross." And so I did and he said, "Now I want you to ask Him, as you look at Christ on the cross, 'What you have to do for Him to be there?'"

This interaction with God facilitated a profound connection with God that Gerry felt spiritually and sexually.

Some form of communion with God before sexual intimacy invited God's involvement and sharing of this personal experience. This process seemed to relax these participants and bring them into closer communion with God. Releasing problems to God ameliorated concentration on the relationship. As practising Christians, these contributors

believed that God was personally present in all of their activities--including sex.

7. State of Receptiveness

This was a condition of being vulnerable and relationally open enough to recognize and express one's needs to one's partner or to God. Trust in oneself and the other person was a necessary ingredient of this predisposing state. Knowing that the relationship was based on commitment enabled partners to be truly known. Openness facilitated awareness of the other person's needs. Mutual desire and attraction also promoted receptiveness. The state of openness could also be enhanced by the context. A private place to celebrate intimacy reduced defenses that may have intruded on a couple's ability to wholly connect. When receptiveness was present between a couple and God, all fully participated in the communion. There was a spirit of readiness.

Some contributors provided vivid examples of the receptive state. Gerry described how the context enabled him and his wife to be very open with each other this way:

We were in a place where we both felt extremely free and safe to do anything sexually like in terms of position or we even talked about our sexual fantasies.

He went on to recount how mutual desire and making each other the priority without distraction promoted profound intimacy. An ability to be more comfortable as a couple because they knew each other well and there was no pretense also eased their fears and promoted openness and permission to explore each other.

We were much more relaxed and much less defensive, (not) worried about our inner self-worth being effected. What I'm trying to define is that there was a greater element of trust between us. We had two years of learning how to trust each other.

Over the last 25 years of marriage the ability to connect sexually and spiritually enhanced for Bill and his wife because:

We know each other. We don't have to impress each other... even if the sex organ itself doesn't function as intensely and as passionately as it once did, now I find that we can give each other pleasure without having to perform in any way... There's totally less shame and it's a result of knowing each other. That's why the bible talks about sex as "knowing."

Because of Cherry's trust and receptivity with her husband, she requested his service of caring and comfort. In her words:

My husband said what could he do for me. And so I said what I needed from him was for him to minister to me.. and so he said, "Well, let's go upstairs and make love."

Will, Cherry's husband, believed that the occasions when he became acutely aware of Cherry's emotional needs and endeavored to help her find fulfillment facilitated the linking of sexual and spiritual urges. Tuning in to her needs encouraged an openness to both dimensions of life. He expressed this attitude as follows:

Probably my being aware of Cherry on an emotional level and her emotional needs and really focusing on serving her. Of all the things that I can do that bring us to the greatest awareness of God in our love making is when I focus on giving her pleasure.

I never lose.

The experience of giving full attention to one's partner and considering his or her needs as primary was mentioned by other participants as well. Even helping another through counselling, as Orlanda mentioned, created more receptivity to God's passion. Being more

selfless may gain divine approval and provoke God's visitation during sexual intimacy.

When Peter and his wife were feeling open and fully participating in the enjoyment of their relationship their desire for each other was in sync. In Peter's words:

More than any other time, my wife's more open and I mean that literally as well as metaphorically. At other times she is a willing participant, but isn't as involved. In a situation like this she is just totally open, receptive, willing, a full participant instead of just a partial participant.

Openness between Peter and his wife promoted deep connection.

Receptiveness was characterized by a spirit of readiness. When couples were actively seeking change or improvement, they demonstrated openness. Patty's experience demonstrated this:

We had that goal, both of us. We were working on our marriage and we were praying that the Lord would heal our marriage so we were focused in that direction that year.

Commitment seemed to be an integral foundation stone for receptiveness. Orlanda's initial experience of God's visual and auditory presence followed a "extremely strong, extremely powerful" sexual relationship with a "committed" lover. It seems that the experience of deep, passionate sexual connection opened her up to connecting spiritually and made the experience more meaningful.

Peter also pointed to intimate knowledge of his wife gained through commitment as a key factor in experiencing sexual and spiritual highs simultaneously. He described how marriage changed his sexual experience:

Before I became a Christian I lived a rather decadent life and it's far different than

even good sex that I've had with other women. There is absolutely no way, I believe, that it could be duplicated outside of the marital relationship.

Trust in the relationship promoted deep connection.

Finally, the receptive state for Grey was the process of removing interfering distractions by choosing to focus on being loving and intimate. He attempted to be receptive by:

making a choice to put aside the issues of the day, whether they are issues at work, things that might be stressful for you, even things that might be stressful in your relationship, if you can lay those aside and say this is a time for us to show each other love and intimacy and to enjoy each other.

He believes:

I think the more focused I am and the more aware I want to be in His presence is when I can experience His presence in a more intense way and that's what sex is if you're going to enjoy it.

Grey's approach to creating receptivity was quite rational. He willed himself to focus on being intimate with his wife and God.

The descriptions of the receptive state delineated by seven of the contributors demonstrated the importance of being vulnerable and open in promoting meaningful spiritual and sexual connection. At times this state was inspired by an event, but more often it was a condition of attitude and feeling that developed as the couple entered and maintained a committed relationship. The receptive state was created by removing distractions, being aware of the other person's needs, and making a conscious effort to truly focus on the experience of intimacy.

8. Mental and Sensory Preparation

Facilitating the connection of spirituality and sexuality often included some form of physical preparation. Although the contributors to this study did not plan to have a sexual and spiritual encounter, by taking time to prepare themselves and the setting of the erotic union their sexual and spiritual energies were more likely to merge. Readiness for intimacy did not just happen; however, at times a novel environment or sensational experience became incorporated as a ritual into later love making. Sensory stimulation and attentiveness provoked more of a full bodied responsiveness to the passion that surged for expression.

Pastor Bill compared the rituals that lay the foundations for intimacy with his wife to worship--a ceremony of reverence, honor, and sacredness. He believed that just as one must get ready for worship, one prepares for sexual bonding. In order to enhance their meaningful encounter this couple engaged in rituals such as:

Both of us usually take a shower first. Then we put on the candles--usually scented candles so they effect the olfactory nerves. Then sometimes my wife puts on some perfume. Then we always play music, we have special music that is stimulating.

We love Mozart, especially his stirring string music.

Preparing the body and inciting the senses brought this couple to a more acute awareness of each other and the richness of their union.

For Grey mentally preparing himself for an intimate time with his wife was part of the ritual experience. In his words:

For us love making doesn't just happen. We have to make dates for it and so, in a sense, that's a ritual. I mean you have a date on Tuesday evening at eight o'clock.

Sometimes it gets that planned and then in some ways it's nice because you're thinking about that date and that's a ritual.

Anticipation of a meaningful encounter can heighten one's readiness for this special time.

Grey also referred to sensual rituals like:

You might have a nice dinner, a glass of wine, and then prepare the room with candles and incense and fire in the fire-place. With regards to sounds, the sound we like most is quiet.

Grey and his wife attempted to reframe things that might interfere with their intimacy focus as a step toward the union they desired. He described it this way:

We've tried to turn things that we don't necessarily like into a ritual of preparing for love making. For example, contraceptives. Its a hassle and so we try to look at it as preparing so its part of the ritual of love making.

Incorporating the practice of contraception into their love making ritual decreased its potential to be distractive or divisive.

The poignant sensory stimulation of a novel environment also intensified arousal levels among some participants. Gerry, an artist, felt strong sensory stimulation in Hawaii, the site of his profound sexual and spiritual encounter. In his description:

So I would say the landscape had a profound impact and the smells are amazing in a tropical environment and for an artistic person--a visual person--I'm surrounded by beautiful flowers and smells and colors of the ocean and the sky ... and beautiful figures (human bodies).

According to Gerry all the sensations "slowed my metabolism down" and "prepared me for sexual experiences."

Another aspect of Gerry's sensual experience was the visual stimulation of observing himself and his wife having sex via a large mirror. This arousing sensation was described this way:

The bedroom of the condominium did have quite a large mirror Men are very visual.

And somehow the reflective image of my wife's body and mine together with the actual experience of intercourse really heightened the experience for me at a level

I've never experienced before.

Visualizing the physical union elevated the sexual experience to a more complete state and opened him to experience spiritual connection.

Patty remembered hearing the song "Light the Fire" immediately preceding her profound sexual and spiritual experience. The song is a passionate worship song with a driving, pulsing rhythm and words that are very intimate. Her prayer had been for God to renew their relational passion and this vibrant song evoked fervor within her. It has been said that music is the language of the gods. This musical sensation stimulated strong passion and connection with her husband and with God.

Although other participants, for example Cherry and Will, indicated that rituals such as music facilitated profound intimacy, the four descriptions included above were the most specific and articulate. Rituals and sensory stimulation not only prepared the whole body to respond, but created and fostered a sense of undivided attention and involvement. The context was set for a special and meaningful encounter that required full participation.

Phase II: Descriptive Themes of the Encounter

The middle phase of the profound sexual and spiritual experience was the heart and soul of the dynamic event. Experiencing peak sexual and peak spiritual connections simultaneously was a mystical encounter. The practising Christians who assisted in this study made unique contributions to unpacking the thematic richness of these profound moments. The variations experienced provide a fuller understanding of the event. The themes described below are very representative of the profound sexual and spiritual encounter. At least eight of the ten participants articulated descriptions in every category. The ordering of the themes is somewhat arbitrary due to the non-linearity of the experience. Depictions from several contributors will help illuminate each theme.

9. Sense of Wonder & Amazement

Although many of the participants subscribed to assumptions that helped them understand this profound experience, all of them were filled with wonder and amazement as they realized what was occurring. This was not a typical experience for them and as Will declared, "I have been kind of surprised by the outbreak of God in it (sex) because I wasn't expecting it." The encounter of connecting sexuality and spirituality was spontaneous, it just happened. The profound connection was surprising to Cherry because often she was "not feeling sexual, (rather) feeling wounded." Gerry seemed to believe that the opposite of what he experienced would occur. Due to his self-critical nature he thought God would be condemn him, rather than condone him with His presence. He was literally, in C. S. Lewis' words "Surprised by Joy."

Besides the quality of being unexpected, the theme of wonder and amazement was characterized by an unbelievable sense. A good example of the contributors' astonishment was from Patty:

I couldn't believe that it was taking place. You know it was like, "What's going on?" I'm praying and God is talking to me and we're having sex at the same time.... I guess it was comical to me that these two things were juxtaposed, that God would be so close, and that we were right in the middle of intercourse; it just didn't seem to compute mentally.

Confusion was related to the unbelievable characteristic. Yawna felt confused and cautious about the power of the relationship between spirituality and sexuality.

Another form of amazement and wonder was the experience of deep meaning.

Cherry's words summarize this quality well:

I guess I marvel mostly at the Lord and that He would create two people to experience such incredible intimacy. Like this is His gift, this is His plan that it is something that He is pleased about. People are honoring each other in this way, and He is pleased that this is what he intended.

The profound significance of her experience provoked a sense of wonder about the purpose and potential of intimate connection.

The "miracle," as Yawna and Bobbie described it, of profound sexual and spiritual experience filled the participants with awe and wonder. Perhaps it was so awesome, wonderful, and amazing because, as we later discover, the encounter was a life-changing event.

10. Emotional Cleansing

Before the contributors were filled with God and fully merged with their lovers, there was often a cleansing release of emotions. As seven of these participants let go of their defenses a purification process took place. They felt overwhelmed and let loose a flood of feelings and inhibitions through tears.

Initially feeling emotionally flat, Patty, "cried brokenly all during sex," after she realized her resentments toward her husband were creating a barrier between them. She was feeling repentant and reported, "My emotions were totally released. It was very cathartic." Cherry's tears were "like stress leaving" and in her experience, "I just started to cry and I could feel God was just all over there and it just started to break whatever it was in me." The experience of other participants indicated that even if there was no specific emotion present, tears seemed to be the most holistic way of releasing the pressure of profound feelings. In Will's experience crying was, "more of an overwhelming emotion rather than responding to a particular emotion...It was just being overwhelmed and what else can you do? You just let it out." Gerry experienced so much freedom and unconditional love from God that:

When you experienced it, when you really feel overwhelmed by it, embraced by it, you can't run from it, you can't argue, you can only weep in front of it.

The physical, emotional, and spiritual components joined in relinquishing deep emotions.

For Orlanda, the outpouring of emotions during peak sexual and spiritual connection coincided with a cleansing of her past "sexual dysfunctions." In her words:

So it went from extreme addiction to sexuality, to receiving orgasm in light of coming to Christ and acknowledging Him as my Lover and being His bride, to being

a virgin, and now singleness... The sexual drive was (diminishing). He was sanctifying me... He was "drying me out" as an alcoholic would dry out. He has drained off and purified (my sexuality).

"Emotional cleansing" released more than just emotions. There was a relinquishment of weighty relational baggage.

11. God's Presence was Evident

God manifested Himself in various ways to these contributors. All of them knew, without doubt, that God was present with them as they were being sexual intimate. Some felt "full of God" or "penetrated" by Him, while others felt His presence hovering around them. Each of the co-researchers experienced God's power and love.

Often God revealed Himself through sensory experience. Patty saw Christ in colorful lights and Grey sensed God as a vapor and fragrance. Patty, Orlanda, Gerry, Grey, Bobbie, Cherry, and Will heard God speaking to them. God's words revealed a truth or more often affirmed and tenderly cherished them. Gerry experienced God's affirming words, "Yes, my love needs to take things away from you sometimes, but this time you can really enjoy this and have my blessing and this is what I made marriage for." On another occasion Gerry felt God's unconditional love and heard God saying, "I love you. I love you so much that I have to do it physically." Grey, Bobbie, and others experienced God's internal, intuitive voice telling them, "This is good" during sex with their spouse.

Progressing through the stages of her sexual and spiritual growth Orlanda, a single woman who had lived as a transsexual, sensed God's auditory presence at several points during her recovery. He told her, "I am your lover," then, "You are my bride," followed by,

"You are a virgin." These incidents were all very sexually fulfilling experiences between her and God and led her to resolve her sexual brokenness and identity issues.

God's presence was also experienced as a peaceful spirit. Bill referred to God's peace as a "non-anxious presence" and that "divine peace which transcends all understanding." When he experienced God during sexual intimacy with his wife it was like, "being in a sacred moment and you don't want to interfere with it or break it... just enjoy." Peter experienced God in the "silence" of the moment just before orgasm. God came in the stillness and Peter felt restful and God's passion "in a quiet way." Patty and Yawna referred to the peaceful aspect of God's presence as "safety" and "security." According to Gerry, the sense of peace and comfort was so marked that, "I felt like somebody was stroking me."

It is significant to note that God was experienced as an intimate friend. Gerry and Orlanda used the words: "without fear, without intimidation, without guilt, without condemnation" to sum up their feelings of God's presence. Grey and Will described God in those moments as "Abba Father"--a loving, caring, relational, father. In these profound encounters they experienced God's acceptance.

Bobbie and Will felt God filling them, being part of them as they were sexually intimate with their spouses. Will knew God was present because:

I can just sense emotions that are not originating from me, particularly if I'm feeling compassionate or love or awareness that I know isn't out of my humanness that comes at that moment we were making love. It is bigger than me.

Will's wife, Cherry, knew God was there because she sensed God ministering to her through Will. She recognized God's power empowering him to touch her at a very deep emotional level.

God's presence during profound sexual intimacy provoked heightened feelings of physical and emotional responsiveness. In Cherry's words, "When God lands on us... there is more arousal, more orgasms, we make love longer, it seems like more endurance, there's more tenderness." Patty echoed her by commenting, "His presence made it (sex) more alive-more real. His love enhances everything we do." The affirming presence of God during sexual intimacy elevated the physical, emotional, and spiritual experience to a level that was qualitatively and profoundly beyond the norm.

12. Intense Union

During the moments of profound sexual and spiritual connection a sense of complete oneness was routinely experienced by the participants. The quality of unity with their lovers was greatly magnified and was often described by the biblical term "one flesh." Contributors sensed far more than just physical union. There was connection of bodies, souls, spirits, and God in a tightly harmonizing quartet.

The union experienced during these profound encounters was described in various ways. There was a quality of intertwining that made it difficult to determine where one ended and another began. The distinctive lines of demarcation became blurred. Patty expressed that she felt, "Really connected, it was almost as though there were no separation between us."

There was a sense of openness and vulnerability between the participants experiencing the intense oneness. Cherry described it vividly:

It is like you are totally one. You are totally connected. There are no walls up.

There is nothing between him and I... It is a very vulnerable thing, you feel totally

wide open. At that moment you could just easily be standing in heaven because that's the way I think it will be in heaven, there are no secrets, there is no pain, there's no sorrow.

Bill recounted his experience of union with his wife as, "openness to one another, without shame, in which we can expose the issues of our personal lives." The intimate oneness was characterized by "knowing" (biblical term for sex) so deeply that personal fears were overcome and there was freedom to be authentic in the connection.

Passion and love were integral elements of this profound union. Bobbie stated, "My love for my husband was intensified." Cherry expressed, "I just fall in love with him more. It is very intimate, very connecting." God's passion mixed with human love cemented a profound bond between the partners.

Intense union also took the form of merging so thoroughly that what one partner experienced the other participant experienced. Gerry attempted to describe this joint experience this way: "You know when two people can almost feel what the other person is experiencing, like you feel together. WOW!" Will stated:

There are those moments when whatever happens to her happens to me too and it's like she wouldn't even have to tell me about an intensity of an orgasm that she would experience because I would have experienced it with her.

Peter's experience of connection with his wife was such that, "suddenly we both become silent and there is sort of a rhythm that works between us, everything else falls away, and there is oneness, togetherness."

The sense of oneness may be so intense because participants recounted that God was part of that union. Bill realized that in the intense union with one another that, "it's not just

the two of us." God was participating with them as a key instrument in the orchestra of intimate sexual consonance. Bobbie recounted the three-way bonding in these words:

It was like God was feeling everything we did and He was saying, "Bobbie this is good and pleasing and pleasurable. I feel it too and this is how I always wanted you to feel it."

Will described the union with his wife and God this way:

The Holy Spirit was really ministering to the two of us together. We were so much united and whatever He did for her He did for me. He was doing it for us as if we were one unit.

God's involvement in the union elevated the sense of bonding.

As a single woman, Orlanda experienced the union directly with God. Comparing it to her human experience of intimacy, she referred to her experience with God as, "It was a bonding that went beyond the human." In her words, "It was the physical penetration that was felt in the physical but it became a deeper, contemplative, settling in the spiritual realm." Her bonding with God was so complete that she felt "one with God" and sexually, emotionally, and spiritually satisfied.

13. Euphoria

As the experience of intense spiritual and sexual connection blossomed, there was a sense of rapturous well-being. Emptiness was overwhelmed with fullness. Although participants struggled to describe their emotional arousal, their remembering smiles depicted their well-being. Often single word or several word descriptors were used to try to capture their sense of euphoria. Bill interchanged the words "euphoria" and "ecstasy." He also

defined his experience as "intensely satisfying" and it was marked by "tremendous sense of peace and personal contentment." Peter preferred the word "bliss" to identify his state of pleasing tranquillity. Grey and Will described their feeling as "well-being." Orlanda felt "completeness and satisfaction" as her being became absorbed by God's fullness.

Another sense of euphoria was supreme happiness. Patty stated that her soul experienced a "deep joy." At times she would, "begin to laugh just pre-orgasm and would laugh through the orgasm and then afterwards." Similar to Patty, Cherry related, "joy would really come and then we just laugh and laugh and just be more playful." "Ecstatically joyful" was how Gerry described his emotions. He went on to narrate a more full account of his joy:

I was glad to be a sexual creature. I was glad to be a man. I was grateful to my wife.

I was glad she was a female and a human being and I was glad the soul was designed in such a way that it could see and feel its pleasure.

An alternative form of euphoria was a sense of goodness or being right. Yawna simply stated, "I feel so good. It is overflowing peace that feels right." When asked to describe well-being, Grey said, "knowing that this was right and this was good and this was fun." Bobbie felt "intensely good" because in the midst of her sexual and spiritual connection she sensed God reminding her that "this is good and pleasing and pleasurable." In the experience of euphoria the participants sensed that they were following God's design and basking in the joy of being in His pleasure.

14. Intense Physical Arousal

In the peak connection of sexuality and spirituality the body joined the chorus of emotional and spiritual pleasure to experience orgasmic delight. Although the orgasmic experience is naturally arousing, physical pleasure was elevated to new heights when God was part of the encounter. All of the participants recognized the wonderful sensations as intensely enjoyable.

Contributors grasped for words to portray their bodily responses. Patty described her profound encounter as "as wild time." The experience of intercourse was "very hot... my whole being was on fire... an extremely ecstatic sensual experience... I had three orgasms. It was extremely enjoyable." Cherry also recounted her multiple orgasms as being "very intense and arousing." "Deeper fullness" is the way Orlanda described her physical pleasure. Peter and Gerry recalled an "intense warmth" that filled their bodies. Gerry explained, "This was the most intense experience of orgasm I've ever had... I felt more connected to it. I felt the build up much more smoothly."

As Will and his wife began to experience God as part of their intimacy he exclaimed:

For all those early years of making love, I got 90% of the pleasure and she got 10%.

And now, even though I'm only getting half the pleasure, I'm getting way more than I ever did before... Inevitably those times all the sensations hit the top ten.

Physical arousal and orgasmic intensity reached toward full potential when spiritual connection occurred.

15. Transcendence

The sense of going beyond normal limits of the self was a common phenomenon of the profound sexual and spiritual experience. The co-researchers experienced the sense of transcendence in several forms: loss of self-awareness, loss of time and space sensations, and liberation or freedom. Although somewhat related to the theme of euphoria, transcendence was different than an emotional high; there was loss of usual orientation to time, place, and self in the experience. The dimensional perception during the experience was beyond the norm.

Loss of the sense of self was exemplified by several contributors. Patty simply stated, "I guess I wasn't extremely aware of (her husband) and I." Bill declared, "In our intense union with one another there's a sense there is something beyond us, a transcendence, not just the two of us." In his experience he and his wife were more than just the "sum of their parts."

Peter explained:

I am a whole person... but it is like it goes fluid on me...I am so used to being disciplined and holding myself together that when it reaches this stage it comes apart, but in a wholesome and healthy way... It is weird... I am totally there but I become less important. But becoming less important, I become more important.

Peter's self came apart, but paradoxically it was larger than life. Gerry described losing his sense of self in the moment of "total freedom." Liberation to accept himself was discovered:

At that complete moment of the climax, I lost the sense of self when I was on the other side of all my enemies: guilt, fear, self-hatred, the fear of other people. It was like my collective history of identity was waiting for me on either side.

His critical self was transcended as he experienced acceptance and love. He believed that "God is not limited by anything," so this moment of freedom in sex "was just a small taste of being like Him-totally free." Cherry's sense of freedom was like a soaring eagle.

According to Orlanda the sense of expansiveness was such that, "it is almost as if you're not of this world--you've entered into another dimension." Cherry described her experience as beyond normal life events:

Like this is a taste of heaven. Like on this side of heaven this is as good as it gets. It is almost like you are off the earth. There is no more pain, no more sorrow.

It was as if one briefly entered eternity. Peter's comment "everything else falls away," and Patty's statement, "Time seemed to suspend; it went beyond time" point to a transcending dimension.

16. Holistic Involvement

There was no dualism in the sexual and spiritual peak experience. The emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of human nature were fully complicated in the encounter. Although the totality of the person being involved may be obvious, it was significant that this non-duality was part of the reason why the experience was so profound. Listening to the participants and analyzing their protocols points to a sense of holistic involvement for each one; however, several expressed this theme specifically.

Patty described her experience as "very deep, it was total and complete; my whole being was involved; every part of me felt alive." As Yawna faced her anxieties she experienced both sexual and spiritual freedom and passion for the first time in 15 years.

Will recounted how his whole being was quickened in the encounter, "At that

moment, when I sense the Holy Spirit the only way I can describe it is spilling over from the spiritual into the emotional and into the physical." He philosophized about why:

It's probably just the way we are made--with the spirit as well as our emotions and our physical body. In those unique time when we manage to bring all three together, it's more the way we were designed to function so I guess it figures that those would be very special times.

Gerry also sensed that all of him was in sync and fit together. The moment was one of integration. In his words:

What happened (with my wife) and in the counselor's office were real moments when God was allowing me to experience wholeness of being integrated sexually, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. All those factors were just naturally one--no distinction among them.

At that profound moment of sexual and spiritual connection the person's whole being responded as one.

17. Sense of Blessing and Giftedness

In the profound sexual and spiritual encounter there was a sense of being chosen by one's lover and by God. The participants' experience was likened to being blessed with a generous gift. The gift was actively received, but with a kind of humility, awe, and a sense of personal unworthiness. The blessing of experiencing such peak connection made them feel special and yet undeserving. At the same time there was gratitude for being deeply loved and favored by God and their lovers.

The experience of being blessed by a gift was recounted by Cherry: "I marvel at the

Lord that He would create two people to experience such incredible intimacy; this is His gift, this is His plan." As Gerry was making love with his wife, God told him, "You can really enjoy this and have My blessing because this is what I made marriage for." In that instance he felt that "this was a gift, a giving moment from God."

The sense of being singled out as special was described by Grey:

It is interesting that on the human side I had a sense that this person is choosing me in the very ultimate, intimate act and I am her choice of all the people in the world and this is wonderful. And it made me understand a little bit how God has chosen us and how special we are in God's sight.

Will echoed Grey's statements and wondered at his unworthiness:

At moments that we have one of those experiences my biggest awareness of God is ... He has blessed me his favorite son with the best gift He could give to me... I feel like the golden haired boy. I cannot imagine anybody having a better marriage or wife than me... I'm overwhelmed by the blessing.

The profound present of special connection was graciously given and respectfully received.

18. Ineffable Mystery

Words failed to accurately or adequately describe this mysterious experience. For many participants the research interview was the first time they attempted to put their experience into words. Throughout the protocols there are phrases such as: "I can't explain it." "It's beyond explanation." "I have no terminology for this." "This is very hard to pin down." "I've never tried to put words to it." "How does one describe it?"

Not only was the profound connection between sexuality and spirituality resistant to

verbal expression, there was a deep sense of mystery associated with the experience. Grey exclaimed, "There's a profound sense of mystery in how this all works because I don't understand it and I think that's somewhat clear in just trying to articulate the experience." Peter referred to his experience as "mystical" and maintains that "communicating mystical experience is so hard because it is paradoxical." The mystery of the experience did not seem to inspire fear; rather, it promoted intrigue and celebration.

19. Sense of Sacredness and Worship

Within the union of the sexual and spiritual dimensions the participants sensed a sacredness and holiness. Although spiritually connecting with God would facilitate an understandable experience of the sacred, there was a sense of purity and holiness that made the incident unforgettable and inspired many participants to worship God.

Patty related her sense of awe and reverence this way:

I had a sense of awe during this experience which was incredible. The sense of awe and holiness was because God's presence sanctified the sexual part for me. Sex became a holier thing... I felt reverence. My body was a holy sanctuary that night.

The sacred presence purified her sexual body. Bill reiterated:

There is a sense of holiness. The presence (of God) caused a sense of forgiveness and renewal and peace came in.

Orlanda experienced her sexuality as "pure, clean, and awesome" as she connected with God's holiness. Peter referred to the experience as "holy" and "sacramental."

Will summed up his worshipful response to the profound connection in these words:

When a husband and wife experience totally being enraptured in that absolutely

ecstatic experience that we were designed to experience that is so pleasurable and actually being able to worship Him, to give Him glory in doing something that is so incredibly pleasurable for us, it's hard to see it as selfish.

The holiness and purity of spiritual sexuality inspired reverent worship of God.

Phase III: Aftereffects

The subsequent effects of profound sexual and spiritual experience were decidedly positive. Enhancement in attitude, feelings, and functioning was experienced toward self, towards others, towards life, and towards God. The healthy aftereffects were enjoyed immediately and were sustained over time. In many cases the experience revolutionized contributors' lives and in all instances the profound event affirmed passionate intimacy. Although all of the positive consequences were not mentioned by each participant in the initial interview, all of the co-researchers vouched for their experience of each category in the follow-up consultations.

20. Transformation and Healing

An effect of the experience of profound sexual and spiritual connection was a sense of renewal and restoration. Unresolved relationships and internal conflicts reached some form of resolution. Past dysfunctions and distortions were released. The longing for completeness and settledness was, at least temporarily, fulfilled.

Healing in relationship to self often included sexual and self-esteem issues. Bobbie's struggle with being sexually and emotionally open was relieved. Since her experience she

has had intercourse with her husband without problems and she accepts herself. In her words: "God has worked a miracle in my life, in my sexuality,... my weaknesses are going to be my strengths, I'm proud I'm Black." Gerry's experience affirmed him as a person because "God said He believed in me" and Gerry felt "relief and a sense of worth and hope and the beginning of maturity." He has a new, more positive self-image and now experiences more "freedom and joy about the essence of his soul." In Yawna's words:

For the first time in my life I feel very much at peace with who I am sexually and spiritually... I feel like a complete person, I can celebrate me. Instead of feeling guilty about my strong sexual longings, now I can just thank God for it.

Yawna's debilitating anxiety was also resolved in this experience.

The healing and cleansing experienced by the contributors brought some to the point of finding a new identity. Many of the hurts and losses of Orlanda's past were released. She "embraced the lover of my soul which has enabled me to put to rest that life." The sexual and spiritual events have allowed her to "know who I am and I don't have to be self-conscious or confused." Her gender confusion has reverted to how "it was originally created to be."

Relational healing was also a prominent result of this profound experience. Patty stated, "A lot of the things that had been standing between us in our relationship seemed to be washed away by the experience." She "made a commitment to change" and her marriage "relationship changed concretely" as a result of the experience. Peter felt a sense of "rejuvenation" and a renewed "freedom to open up areas that we would have been reluctant to deal with before." Will believed his sexual and spiritual experiences have brought "healing in our relationship" especially as he "realized my selfishness" and endeavored to

"acknowledge and serve her more." Cherry believed the most powerful healing of "a past hurt or something emotional" was when "God ministers to us during love making."

As a result of the profound sexual and spiritual encounter participants' lives and relationships were changed. It was seen as a "wonderful life-changing event" that met deep needs.

21. Empowerment and Purpose

The participants experienced a sense of strength or courage and a sense of mission or purpose. The profound sexual and spiritual encounter filled them with an element of hope and desire to persevere in helping themselves and helping others. The preceding emptiness and restlessness gave way to fullness.

The fulfilling effect of peak sexual and spiritual experience was described in several ways. Some felt energized. Grey said, "I feel invigorated. I feel like getting up and doing something." Cherry experienced "strong afterwards" and "there is a sense like you could go out and conquer the world." Bill was impressed with "the sense of courage and power and strength to face life." The sense of empowerment could be long lasting. Orlanda believed God has promised to give back "the years the locusts have eaten" and presently feels "the energy of someone twenty years younger" than sixty-five. Gerry stated, "The aftereffects have created a form of endurance through some hard times we've been through." As he faced personal anxieties as well as the tensions of watching his wife go through trauma during child-birthing, the sexual and spiritual encounter "flashed through my mind and gave me endurance."

Some participants experienced empowerment in an aftereffect of calm and

relaxation. Peter related that "mentally and physically I feel restful and quiet for a while." Patty sensed "complete peace and calm and relaxation." The impression of depletion was filled with the strengthening of being rested.

A drive towards a personal purpose and mission to others often was the focus of empowerment. Will stated his purpose explicitly:

We are almost on a mission to help people. It's not a mission to help people experience sex the way we do, it's a mission to help people have the kind of marriage they were designed to have, calling them out to be all that God designed them to be.

He saw this as a "big responsibility" because "I have been given so much." Orlanda's purpose has become the "giving of myself to another" who has struggled with her kinds of sexual issues. She has just committed herself to a ministry to help people with confused sexual identities and she "would not have the motivation or intuitiveness to even think of others so consumed with my past" without her sexual and spiritual experiences.

22. Passionate Awareness and Connection

As a result of the profound sexual and spiritual encounter contributors sensed a heightened passion for spouses, others, God, and creation. Awakening passion led to increased awareness of the world around them and to be vulnerable and free to relate more openly and spontaneously to it. There was a greater sense of connectedness and bonding to their intimate contexts.

Increased passion effected relationships. All of the contributors sensed a deeper love and bonding with their spouses as a result of their profound experience. Grey related that "the more profound the spiritual experience for me, the more profound is my sense of loving

my wife and how much she loves me." Yawna experienced "deeper longings sexually and spiritually" and has become able to passionately "let go" with her husband during intimacy. Patty felt "very sexy" toward her husband for several days following her experience and believed that since that event "our marriage and sex life is better and better." Considering that he grew up in a dysfunctional home and learned to restrict his feelings, Peter's "ability to be passionate has grown remarkably" due to his sexual and spiritual encounters. According to Will, "when we make love like this our connection is turbo charged." Following these experiences he feels "very aware of that connection" even when he and his wife are physically separated in the succeeding days.

Bobbie's ability to communicate with her husband was noticeably improved:

I sure am much more vulnerable and transparent now. It has really heightened our communication. We understand each other better and seem to have a deeper bonding.

Enhanced communication was common for all participants.

A sense of radiance characterized some contributor's passion. After having a wholly connecting experience with God and his wife, Will felt that others could notice his "glowing." In his words. "It's embarrassing to go out in public because I feel like everybody knows what happened, it just shows." He described it as analogous to the Old Testament experience of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai after he had been with God. The people were afraid of him because his face and skin had a sheen or radiance (Exodus 34:29,30).

The sense of passion also had a vulnerable quality with a keener awareness of connection to others and creation. When Cherry had this profound intimate experience she sensed "a really powerful softness and vulnerability." She took more time to "smell the

flowers and the coffee" and "tends to be aware of what is really important, like relationships." Cherry recounted how she became more sensitive to her children's needs instead of compulsively completing household chores.

Bill's passion extended from his wife to God, to work, to parenting, to gardening, and to his parishioners. He referred to this as the "ripple effect" and has "a renewed awareness of the presence of God and the ability to inter-communicate with God and a much greater appreciation and awareness of creation itself." Each participant expressed deeper love and bonding to God.

23. Affirmation of Godly Beliefs

Succeeding the profound sexual and spiritual encounter was an experience of deeper belief and trust in God. God has proven Himself faithful and participants' confidence in God was elevated. At times this affirmation of Godly beliefs required discarding distorted assumptions about God and restoring previous "hoped for" principles of God's character.

Grey's experience affirmed what he already believed about God. His "belief that God is who He said He is and so what He has revealed about Himself in His word and in my experience is true and I can trust Him" verified Grey's belief that God is love and "perfect love casts out fear." Bobbie experienced a reaffirmation and trust in God. Through her experience God reminded her:

Bobbie, I told you I was good. I told you I was patient. I told you I was loving. I told you that I birthed you and formed you in your mother's womb.

Bobbie's response to God was "now You've proven to me that You are like this. You are just who you said you were." Patty and Orlanda confirmed their beliefs that God was

"trustworthy" and "security."

Beliefs were also adjusted through the experience. Gerry "didn't expect passion from God." He was expecting "judgement" and gained a new understanding that God loved and affirmed him. His beliefs were changed to "I believe in Your love" and "I believe in Your unlimitedness." This experience affirmed his trust in God and inspired hope that "in heaven we can be ecstatically free and joyful about who we are." Will also has a new concept and hope for heavenly existence. His experience confirmed for him that there will be the "consummation of oneness" in heaven and that a pure sexuality might be part of the divine intimacy and pleasure.

Due to the experience of profound connection sexually and spiritually Bill has defined his theology about salvation more thoroughly. He concluded:

The Greek word "Soteria" for "salvation" literally means wholeness....In most of our evangelical circles, we have given salvation a very narrow focus--that there's a freeing from sin; whereas the bible has a much, much greater perspective in terms of wholeness....It is salvation that encompasses physical health, wholesome relationships, a renewed awareness of the presence of God, and the ability to inter-communicate with God, and then a much greater appreciation and awareness of creation itself.

Bill's theology of salvation encompassed the whole experience of personhood and affirmed that God was involved in human sexual experience and that God created humans with the ability to be deeply intimate.

24. Great Gratefulness

The aftermath of such a profound experience was characterized by a tremendous sense of gratitude. Thanksgiving was directed toward life, toward spouses, and toward God. There was a response of feeling profound gratefulness for the meaningful sexual and spiritual connection.

Gratitude was directed towards God for the gift of sexual intimacy and for blessing a relationship with His presence. Bill felt the urge to pray "as an expression of thanks that God has given us this gift of sexuality and that it is the most profound way of enabling us to find a sense of unity or intimacy." Grey was thankful to God for helping him overcome his fear of intimacy and sex "because He did it in the most perfect way for me." Cherry felt "incredibly grateful and thankful that God cares" and made sex so deeply intimate.

Gratitude was also pointed towards one's spouse. Will stated that "when I talk to Cherry afterwards I express what a gift she is to me." Participants spoke of feeling overwhelmed with praise and thanksgiving for their partners and for their wonderful bonding experience.

25. Sense of Equality

A final aftereffect of the sexual and spiritual encounter was a deep sense of parity with one's partner. Gender dualism ceased and participants felt equality, partners of the same value and worth. Although only four contributors mentioned this as a specific aftereffect during the initial interview, all of them responded affirmatively to this theme in subsequent discussions.

If there is a "oneness" experienced with another human it is understandable that any

sense of inequality diminishes. Bill affirmed that he and his wife felt "one--equal to each other with God" following their experience. Will's experiences have impressed him that husband and wife have equal rights in love making. He is motivated to bring this message to men and women and enhance other's understanding of gender equality. In his words:

I want to get people off their twisted thinking, particularly the men. I've been there and making love can be the most selfish thing and it keeps women down and keeps robbing them. God does not have pleasure in that.

The profound experience of connecting with God and another human during sexual intimacy broke down dualism in all forms. There was potential of reconciling spirit and body, humanity and nature, and woman and man.

THE FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE

Although there were some individual differences in the accounts of the profound sexual and spiritual experience among the ten practising Christians interviewed for this study, a fundamental structure or common story emerged. The goals of this research were to discover the preconditions and facilitating events, the description of the experience, and the aftereffects of the incident. Therefore it is natural that the resulting narrative consists of a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning can be seen as the context that set the stage for the profound connection. The attitudes, feelings, and events that prepared the pathway to the experience are examined here. The middle phase, the heart of the story, includes the thematic descriptions that help unpack the richness of the mystical encounter. The conclusion summarizes the enhancing effects of the experience on relationships to self,

others, God, and life.

Unfolding the collective experience of the sexual and spiritual encounter follows the linear progression of the three phases identified above. However, within each section there is movement and non-linearity. Some of the various descriptions and categories that construct each phase need to be viewed as existing concurrently and interconnectedly. The twenty-five themes previously described are weaved into this narrative.

Common Story

The introduction or beginning of the narrative recounting the powerful experience that was simultaneously sexual and spiritual describes the preceding conditions and facilitating events. Some attention to chronological order is attempted. Although there were some discrepancies among the co-researchers and some conditions seemed to co-exist, the order presented tends to represent the developing story most accurately.

A common condition that preceded the profound sexual and spiritual encounter was an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual state of unsettledness. Co-researchers sensed that something was missing or not right. A manifestation of unsettledness was a feeling of incompleteness and separation. Because an essential ingredient or intimacy was missing, the contributors experienced a longing and yearning for fulfillment and relational connection. Some contributors felt fatigue, confusion, restlessness, and resentment along with the sense of incompleteness. Guilt and fear, significant inhibitors of free expression and intimacy in sexual relations, were other negative emotions experienced. Passion was fettered. The dynamics of the unsettled state motivated participants to seek resolution, restitution, and

fullness for their spiritual and relational needs.

The unsettled feelings of the introductory state were often experienced because some truth was hidden or repressed. Having a friend, counsellor, or God reveal an unadmitted issue promoted knowing why a sense of incompleteness and restless was experienced. Facing and accepting personal and relational truths enabled the co-researchers to clear the barriers that impeded connection with self and with another. Admission of truth engendered self-awareness that freed a person from distortions and limitations of his or her past. "Coming clean" was psychologically and spiritually freeing and paralleled Jesus' words, "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32). The revealing nature of truth promoted an authentic state where the fullness of sexual and spiritual connection could take place.

Accepting the truth about oneself encouraged a person to remove the obstacles to intimacy with one's mate and with God. The action of reconciliation changed the deeds of the past. The process included personal acceptance and confession of wrongs that contributed to the intimacy barrier, and requesting and experiencing forgiveness. Honest communication and forgiveness were essential and liberating forces in facilitating deep connection. Through reconciliation there was acceptance toward and from oneself, one's lover, and God. There was relinquishment of the embeddedness of the past. There was a sense of relational renewal and hope. The pathway was cleared for a potential sexual and spiritual experience.

Predisposing beliefs that incorporated a holistic view about linking the physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual components of human nature during intimacy predicated the possibility of experiencing profound sexual and spiritual connection. Assumptions shared

by contributors that predisposed them for this experience were: God is sexual and fundamentally relational (passionate) with humans; God blesses and approves of sexual enjoyment within marriage; sexual union between a husband and wife is representative of Christ's (groom) relationship to the church (His bride); and the biblical term "one flesh" means physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy. Although the experience was unexpected, these tenets created a foundation for the practising Christians to understand their profound experience of intimacy.

Acceptance of God's existence and God's involvement in human experiences created an openness for God to intervene in human affairs. God meeting or ministering through humans seemed to awaken passions that were directed God-ward and human-ward. Preceding spiritual events, such as a conversion experience, direct communication from God, or an experience of being used by God to speak His words in preaching, promoted an awareness of God's closeness. God interrupted participants' lives on their behalf to demonstrate His power. Sexual passions were aroused with spiritual passions as God initiated intervention in human experience.

Although the experience of God introducing Himself to people or the experience of God using a human as a vehicle for His words facilitated awareness of God, contributors also prepared themselves for a profound connection by seeking communion with God. Instead of God seeking them, participants pursued God. Through worship, meditation, scripture reading, and prayer, connection with God was sought prior to the profound sexual and spiritual experience. Although the devotional and intercessory prayers did not specifically ask God to be part of the sexual connection, communion with God before sexual intimacy drew Him near; He then choose to bless the union with His involvement and share

in the intimate experience.

Throughout the initial phase of this powerful experience was a state of receptivity. An attitude and feeling of trust created the vulnerability necessary to express one's needs to one's partner and to God. Knowing that the relationship was based on commitment enabled partners to be truly known. Mutual desire and attraction were inherent in the sense of receptivity. Removing distractions and defenses, awareness of the other's needs, and consciously focusing on the experience of intimacy enhanced this state of openness. When receptiveness was present between a couple and God, all participated in the communion. There was a spirit of readiness.

Although the contributors to this study did not plan to have a sexual and spiritual encounter, by taking time to prepare their mental and sensory states and the setting of the erotic union, their sexual and spiritual energies were more likely to merge. Sensory stimulation through color, lighting, visualization, fragrance, music, tastes, and tactile response engaged the body. Setting a date for intimacy and anticipating the encounter incited the mind. Arousing mental and sensory experiences became incorporated into rituals that prepared for later love making. Preparation through these forms of stimulation was likened to worship--a ceremony of honor. Rituals and sensory stimulation not only provoked a full bodied responsiveness to passion's urging expression, they also fostered a sense of undivided attention. The context was set for a special, meaningful encounter that involved full participation.

The second phase or middle of the story describes the essence of the profound sexual and spiritual encounter. A number of dynamic themes explore the deep fullness of this experience. While the description is necessarily linear, most of the feelings and themes

expressed occurred simultaneously and throughout the peak event.

As the realization that a profound sexual and spiritual experience was occurring for the participants, there was a sense of wonder and amazement. Even if a contributor had several of these experiences, the profound encounter was not typical and was certainly unexpected. The astonishment experienced was characterized by an unbelievable quality. Was this really happening? Added to the amazement was a sense of confusion. How is this happening? Another form of wonder was the experience of deep meaning. Participants marveled about the incredible intimacy that God designed for humans to enjoy. The "miracle" of the profound sexual and spiritual experience filled the participant with awe and wonder.

The sexual and spiritual connection with one's partner and with God included a deep emotional cleansing. As participants let go of their defenses to freely experience the fullness of intimacy, they felt overwhelmed and a flood of feelings and inhibitions poured from their inner depths. This emotional purification process was experienced as a "drying out" of personal and relational issues for some. Others felt no specific emotion, but tears were the most holistic way of releasing the pressure of profound feelings. Being overwhelmed with divine connection demanded the most humanly engaging emotional response.

Perhaps the whole of one's being had to respond through emotional cleansing because the manifest presence of God was so real. Each contributor knew, beyond a doubt, that God was present with him or her as sexual intimacy was taking place. At times God revealed Himself through sensory mediums. God was sensed through His words, visions, His "Godly fragrance," or His touch. Some felt "full of God" or "penetrated" by Him. His presence was deeply caring and relational. God was not just an observer but a participant in

the experience. The love and peace of God's attendance greatly heightened the physical, emotional, and spiritual sense of connection and pleasure.

During the moments of profound connection a sense of complete union was commonly experienced by the participants. The quality of the oneness, often identified as "one flesh," was so inclusive that bodies, souls, spirits, and God joined in a tightly harmonizing consonance. Intertwining of participants made the distinctive boundaries of the selves blurred. The sense of openness and vulnerability momentarily experienced among the relationships allowed each partner into the experience of the other without shame. Intense love and bonding characterized the union. The sense of oneness was so profound because God was performing with humanity as a key instrument in the orchestra of sexual intimacy.

A sense of exhilarating euphoria accompanied the profound sexual and spiritual encounter. Rapturous well-being was experienced as emptiness was overwhelmed with fullness. Intense satisfaction and contentment characterized this blissful state. Supreme joy overtook the experiencer's mood. "Ecstatic happiness" infiltrated all aspects of the meaningful event. In the experience of euphoria the participants sensed they were following God's design and basking in the joy and goodness of being in His pleasure.

Consorting with the sense of euphoria was a feeling of intense physical pleasure. Orgasmic delight was elevated to new heights when God was part of the intimate encounter. Multiple orgasms and wonderful sensations were difficult to describe. Words like "hot," "wild," "intensely orgasmic," and "extremely pleasurable" struggled to justify the physical response. Physical arousal was elevated toward full potential when spiritual connection was in unison with sexual climax.

The sense of transcendence or of going beyond the normal limits of the self was a common attribute of the phenomenon. There was a loss of usual orientation to time, space, and self. Time was suspended and other aspects of life ceased to exist for that moment. It was as if one entered into another dimension--"out of this world"--similar to heaven. Self-sense was expanded. "Total freedom" and a sense of unlimitedness liberated the participant from critical parts of the self. Dimensional perception during the experience transcended the ordinary. There was a sense that individually and relationally the participants were "more than the sum of their parts."

The sexual and spiritual peak experience was without dualism. There was a sense of personal integration and oneness. Emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of human nature were fully complicated in the encounter. The depth and breadth of involvement quickened the participant's whole being to join the celebration. Profundity was enhanced when a person was holistically committed to the experience.

Because the sexual and spiritual connection was so special, there was a marked sense of being blessed with a generous gift. The gift was actively received with humility, awe, and a sense of personal unworthiness. Participants felt undeserving of being distinctively chosen. At the same time there was gratitude for being deeply loved and favored by God and their lovers.

Words failed to adequately or accurately describe this mysterious experience. The ineffable nature of the profound encounter left participants floundering for "verbal handles." Mystery and paradox surrounded the event. Although resistant to verbal expression and logical comprehension, the experience promoted intrigue and celebration rather than fear and indifference.

Finally, within the union of the sexual and spiritual dimensions the contributors sensed sacredness and holiness. While spiritual connection with God would create an under-standable experience of the sacred, there was a sense of purity and holiness that made the incident unforgettable and inspired many participants to worship God.

The subsequent effects of profound sexual and spiritual experiences resound with positivity. Enhancement in attitude, feelings, and functioning toward self, others, God, and life were enjoyed immediately and sustained over time. Contributors' lives were changed and passionate intimacy was affirmed. The ordering of themes in this final chapter of the story is somewhat arbitrary.

An effect of the profound sexual and spiritual connection was a sense of transformation and healing. Dysfunctions and distresses of the past were relinquished. The yearning for completeness and settledness was fulfilled. Internal conflicts, personal losses, and self-esteem reached some form of resolution. A renewed sense of identity was established. Relational discord disappeared and selfless attitudes dominated selfish ambitions. The healing effects were dramatically experienced in the immediate and continued from that moment. It was a marker event, a "life-changing experience," that brought change and fulfillment to participants' lives and relationships.

Empowerment and purpose followed the meaningful encounter of sexuality and spirituality. The impression of depletion was filled with the revitalizing power of being rested. The participants felt a surge of strength and endurance that enabled them to face the problems of living with vigor and steadfastness. Courage and hope filled their beings. Empowerment to find purpose and a sense of mission directed participants to continue growing in their personal relationships and to have the energy to help others resolve their

issues or discover more fulfilling intimacy.

As a result of the profound encounter contributors experienced an elevated passion for spouses, others, God, and creation. Increased passion led to greater sensory awareness of relatedness to one's world. There was vulnerability and freedom to engage oneself more openly and spontaneously. Participants noticed the significant things in life. Ability to communicate was enhanced. These qualities promoted bonding and love within all relationships. Passion extended from the primary relationship to create a greater sense of connectedness to loved ones, work, hobbies, and the cosmos.

A deeper belief and trust in God succeeded the mystical sexual and spiritual experience. God had proven Himself faithful and as the epitome of love. Confidence in God grew. At times affirming Godly beliefs required discarding distorted assumptions such as: God doesn't care, or God would be judgmental. The experience confirmed for the participants that trust in God brings security and that their experience might be a foretaste of heavenly ecstasy. Participants' theology of salvation changed to encompass the whole experience of personhood and affirmed that God was involved in human sexual experience and that He created humans with the ability to be deeply intimate.

Throughout the aftermath of such a profound experience was a tremendous sense of gratitude. Thanksgiving was directed towards God for the gift of sexual intimacy, for help in overcoming intimacy barriers, and for blessing the relationship with His presence. The gift of connecting with one's spouse was thankfully acknowledged. Participants felt overwhelmed with praise and gratitude for the meaningful experience and the partners that shared that wonderful bond.

A final aftereffect of the sexual and spiritual encounter was a deep sense of parity

with one's partner. Gender dualism was rendered powerless. Although many participants already sensed equality with their "other-gendered" spouses, the experience affirmed that they were partners of the same value and worth. The profound experience of connecting with God and another human being during sexual intimacy broke down dualism in all forms. There was potential for reconciling spirit and body, humanity and nature, and woman and man.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Summary of Purpose and Results

This study investigated the meaning and experience of profound sexual and spiritual encounters among practising Christians. The facilitating events and preconditions leading to these intense experiences as well as the aftereffects of sexual and spiritual connection were also examined. Five men and five women representing various Christian denominations were interviewed regarding their experience of simultaneous sexual and spiritual peak events. The interviews and analysis of the participants' descriptions were conducted according to the tenets of phenomenological inquiry, particularly as proposed by Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1985), Osborne (1990), and Polkinghorne (1989).

An analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of twenty-five themes and a common structure--or common story--of the participants' experience of the sexual and spiritual encounter. The common story is a synthesis of the participants' collective experience of profound sexual and spiritual connection. Following Cochran's (1990) narrative format of a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, the twenty-five themes were divided into three phases of the sexual and spiritual experience: The Preconditions and Facilitating Events; The Descriptive Themes of the Encounter; The Aftereffects.

Phase I--Preconditions and Facilitating Events--contains eight categories. These themes are: (1) Unsettled State; (2) Revelation of Truth; (3) Reconciliation through Communication, Confession, Forgiveness; (4) Predisposing Beliefs and Expectations; (5) Preceding Spiritual Event; (6) Communion with God; (7) State of Receptivity; (8) Mental

and Sensory Preparation.

Phase II--Descriptive Themes of the Encounter--include themes nine to nineteen. These themes are: (9) Sense of Wonder and Amazement; (10) Emotional Cleansing; (11) Evidence of God's Presence; (12) Intense Union; (13) Euphoria; (14) Intense Physical Arousal; (15) Transcendence; (16) Holistic Involvement; (17) Sense of Blessing and Favor; (18) Ineffable Mystery; (19) Sense of Sacredness and Worship.

The final phase--Aftereffects--comprise themes twenty to twenty-five which include: (20) Transformation and Healing; (21) Empowerment and Purpose; (22) Passionate Awareness and Connection; (23) Affirmation of Godly Beliefs; (24) Great Gratefulness; (25) Sense of Gender Equality.

This chapter interprets these results in light of the previous theoretical opinions on sexual and spiritual connections discussed in Chapter II. The research results are also understood in relation to psychological conjectures on love, transpersonal psychology's perspectives on mystical peak experience, Christian theological notions regarding sexuality, and existing research on sexual and spiritual encounters. This is followed by examining the limitations of this study and sections detailing the implications of the results for future research and counselling.

The Relation of Research Results to Theory

Definitions of Sexuality and Spirituality

Results of this study provide an experiential basis for adding to definitions and understanding of sexuality and spirituality. Biological and individualistic demarcations of

sexuality are reductionistic and offer a barren account of a richly meaningful experience (Reynolds, 1992). Nelson's (1983) more holistic rendering of sexuality includes the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion with another human and with God. The profound descriptive themes of intense sexual and spiritual encounters among the practising Christians in this study demonstrate that sex is potentially more than just physical release or emotional intimacy and affirms Nelson's demarcation of sexuality. The whole person--physically, emotionally, and spiritually--consorts with another human and God during these profound moments of intimate connection.

Components of spirituality--including meaning and purpose, sacredness, interconnectedness, transcendence, mystery, ecstasy, relinquishment, forgiveness, and love--proposed by Elkins et al. (1988), Ingersoll (1994), and Vaughan (1994) are supported by the experience of this study's participants. Descriptions provided by the contributors to this research unpack some of the richness of spiritual connection.

The meaning of spirituality is also expanded by this research. The results furnish some insight into Helminiak's (1989) conceptualization of spirituality as the integration of all aspects of the person and the actualization of one's fullest potential. The union of the emotional, physical, and spiritual components for the participants in this study elevated their experience to levels that encouraged authenticity, euphoria, selflessness, cleansing, freedom, transformation, and expanded awareness of self, another and God. Helminiak's notions of human "integration" and actualization of human potential are affirmed and elucidated by the descriptive themes revealed by the contributors to this study.

Christian understanding of spiritual closeness with God (e.g. Benner, 1988; Gillett, 1993) is illuminated by the potential passion of this connection. The depiction of the

passionate love and acceptance of God during intense moments of spiritual connection demonstrates the kind of affirming love that God bestows toward His beloved. The results reveal that Christian spirituality can be experienced as a passionate union with God.

Historical Relevance

Positive attitudes and experience regarding the linking of sexuality and spirituality among Christians throughout history are affirmed by the outcomes of this research. It is possible that the descriptive themes discovered in this study reflect some of the elevating spiritual pleasures of sexual intercourse experienced by couples in Noyes' Oneida Colony discussed by Foster (1985). The possible relevance of this research to Christian theological understanding will be discussed later.

The erotic connections with God experienced by medieval mystics such as John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, and Teresa of Avila receive some clarification through the results of this study. Although nine of the ten participants in this research experienced sexual and spiritual connection while being intimate with another human, "Orlanda," the single woman, encountered passionate intimacy with God alone. These results provide some evidence to suggest that the passion of God can be experienced physically, emotionally, and spiritually between God and a single human as well as within the intimacy of human relationships. This erotic connection with God is not restricted to an historical time period; for participants in this study it is relevant in the twentieth century.

Common Origins of Sexuality and Spirituality

As discussed in the literature review, sexuality and spirituality can be perceived as originating from states of emptiness or incompleteness. This seeking aspect of human motivation common to both dimensions is affirmed by this research. In Phase I of the

profound sexual and spiritual experience, one of the preconditions was an "unsettled state." This theme was characterized by feelings of being incomplete and unfulfilled. A sense of longing for more or of seeking connection was paramount in this precondition. The participants of this study found resolution and fullness as their sexual and spiritual longings were satiated during their intense encounters. As the linking of sexuality and spirituality was fully experienced, these participants transcended themselves and entered into mystical union with another and with "ultimate reality."

If one accepts a Biblical anthropology--that humans were created by God in the image of God (Genesis 1:26)--the experience of the practising Christians in this study provides information regarding the similar rootedness of sexuality and spirituality. In the words of Marshall (1994), "God's passion created ours. Our deep desiring is a relentless returning to that place where all things are one" (p. 28). Human desire for deep connection with God and with another human could be seen as being created by God to match God's profound yearning to connect with His creation. According to the results of this research, indications are that if humans open themselves to deep connection with God, profound union with another human can also occur. The nature of these intense encounters includes physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Similarity of Sexual and Spiritual Energy Flow

The common themes drawn from the outcomes of this research provide empirical evidence that demonstrates the similarities of sexual and spiritual energies. Deep passionate arousal led contributors toward another human and toward God. While the results do not verify which energy--spiritual or sexual--comes first, indications are that spiritual connection with God can elicit sexual connection with another human. Prayer and

communion with God can excite physical and emotional passion. At the same time, giving oneself fully and selflessly to meaningful and loving sexual intimacy can elicit deep wonder, sacredness, thanksgiving, and a sense of profound connection with God.

Gerald May's (1982) notions of how sexual and spiritual energies are similar are supported by this research. He suggests that repression of one energy through guilt or fear leads to repression of the other energy. The accounts of this study's participants reveal that separation from God led to lack of connection with their human lovers, and unresolved conflict between human partners led to spiritual separation. "Letting go" and clearing the pathway to God facilitated deep intimacy with a person's intimate other. At the same time, removing the barriers between human lovers promoted connection with God. Perhaps profound sexual and spiritual connections occur as the similar energies are unbridled and allowed to freely pursue the objects of their desire. More discussion of the pathway to sexual and spiritual connection will be offered in the section on how the results of this research relate to transpersonal psychology.

Indications from the outcomes of the current research point to a relationship between sexual and spiritual energies. The results suggest that experiencing intense levels of one dimension can invoke powerful responses in the other dimension. Therefore the outcomes suggest caution when experiencing strong spiritual connection with clients or persons who are inappropriate sex partners.

Impact of Sexual and Spiritual Encounters on Theories of Love

Passion and *Eros*

Results of this research suggest that there is a strong passionate component to spiritual and sexual connection among Christians. Hatfield and Rapson's (1987; 1993)

demarcation of passion's potential that includes intense union, moments of exultation, feelings of being understood and accepted, sense of security, and experiences of transcendence are tantamount to the descriptive themes derived from the experiences of participants in this study. It is also apparent that passion can be experienced in spiritual as well as sexual connections. Indications are that passion can be enjoyed within the whole person.

The comparative nature of *eros* to passion and the spiritual aspects of *eros* discussed by Coleman (1994), Gerald May (1982), and Smedes (1978) find empirical affirmation in the outcomes of this investigation. May and Smedes' understanding of *eros* as a "creative force" and a "driving desire for personal growth" are well supported by the participants' experience. The contributors to this study discovered new truths about themselves, their partners, and God as they experienced sexual and spiritual connection. As Coleman suggests, the erotic passion experienced by these practising Christians was not extinguished by sexual consummation; it was intensified and continued to seek passionate connection with spiritual realms. Eros propelled yearning toward and fulfillment of mystical union that promoted temporary fullness and completion. Rollo May's (1969) characteristics of *eros* as a transforming power are realized as these participants revealed the life-changing and empowering aftereffects of their profound experience.

Psychoanalytic interpretations of erotic love originating in early attachment between infant and mother have not been directly elucidated by this research. Although it could be argued along with Mahler (1968) and Jung (1926) that the longings for union in passionate love are reminiscent of the yearnings for the security of mother, there appears to be much more. As maturity progresses humans recognize that humans have limits. Talley (1980)

suggests that this awareness of human limits provides impetus in the compelling passion for love and union with the Ultimate.

From a Christian theological perspective, if humans originate from the creative acts of God, then reuniting with God is somewhat similar to re-attachment with mother (Talley, 1980). Tillich (1954), a Christian theologian, propounds that sin, and consequently death, estranges humans from God (Romans 5:12). He points to Paul's words, "For surely you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death" (Romans 6:3) as part of the process of reunion. Tillich proposes that dying to self is a prerequisite to any union (Galatians 2:19-20) and going beyond one's finite state. Reunion with God fulfills human spiritual needs. Therefore surrendering oneself can lead one to mystical union with God and a transformed life.

MacKnee (1996) acknowledges that "the French have traditionally referred to orgasm as 'la petite mort,' or 'the little death'" (p. 101). Perhaps "death" to self or relinquishment of ego's will is necessary for sexual as well as spiritual peaks. This is somewhat paradoxical. Erikson (1954) argues that mature intimacy is the mutual search for a shared identity by finding oneself as one loses oneself in another. Schnarch (1991), a renowned sex therapist, suggests that if a person faces the fear of death to self and of losing one's lover, intimacy will vault to "quantum" levels. The experience of the contributors to this study demonstrates that as truth of self was revealed and the parts of self that hindered connection to another human and God were relinquished, mystical union and acceptance transformed the participants and promoted life-changing effects of healing, purpose, and ability to be passionate.

The quest for spiritual reunion appears to be similar to the desire to regain the

security and affirming acceptance from another human. From a psychoanalytic object relations perspective, "God is the only object who has total knowledge of the self as perceived by the person" (Underwood, 1986, p. 301). As another human loved one becomes aware of the depth and essence of another person, the experience of love and acceptance between humans can approximate God's all-knowing acceptance of a person.

Intimacy

Intimacy, an emotional and maturing component of Sternberg's (1988) model of love, seems to play a role in sexual and spiritual connection among practising Christians. The knowing of oneself and another that comes through exposure over time encourages sexual potential according to Schnarch (1991), Moore (1994), Fromm (1956), and Welwood (1980). Schnarch's view of "self-validated intimacy"--intimacy that involves self-confrontation and self-disclosure in the presence of a partner--is supported by this study. His description of mystical experiences that can occur at this depth of sexual intimacy are in line with the experience of spiritual and sexual peak connection portrayed by this study's participants. Mature intimacy described in Schnarch's model suggests that the celebration of intimacy is an experience of fullness. As the body is satiated (orgasm), the soul and the spirit continue the celebration and expands what is known. This "quantum" model for sex could be understood as going beyond the limits of human experience because the infinite God is passionately and intimately involved in the profound encounter. Freedom to transcend the usual limits of sexual and spiritual connection occurs because the participants let go and experience the mystery, wonder, euphoria, arousal, blessing, sacredness, and bonding of enhanced sexuality due to the inclusion of spiritual elements.

While it is not known if these profound encounters could occur with little knowledge

between human partners or early in the time-line of human relationships, the experience of the participants in this study indicates that these meaningful moments occurred after years of committed relationships. Profound potentials for sexual intimacy seem to be directly related to the amount of time developing trusting and open communion. It is evident that the highest level or quality of orgasmic experience is with an intimate other who is deeply loved (Donaldson, 1989; Michael et al., 1994). The results of this study indicate that peak sexual union requires mutual trust in the security of a committed relationship with another person, just as spiritual union requires unquestioned trust in God.

Transpersonal Psychology's Mystical Peak Experience

Reviewing the descriptors of profound sexual and spiritual connection that were common to the contributors of this research, it is clear that their experience is beyond the norms of usual sexual intimacy. These higher states of consciousness experienced by this study's co-researchers fit the assumptions and definitions of transpersonal experience proposed by Frager (1989) and Lajoie and Shapiro (1992). Similar to Maslow (1964) and Panke's (1980) typologies of mystical peak experience, sexual and spiritual connection among Christians is an elevating encounter that includes characteristics of internal and external unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, a sense of sacredness, deep personal insights, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency, and persisting changes in attitude and behavior. Because the experience studied in this research fits the categories described by the above models, it is reasonable to assume that the participants in this study encountered "mystical peak experiences" as understood by transpersonal psychologists.

While Maslow (1964) and Panke's (1980) models relate to all kinds of peak experience, this research examined a particular kind--sexual and spiritual encounters. Due to the fact that all of the participants recounted a peak experience that was simultaneously sexual and spiritual, the quality of the experience can be explored more specifically and more completely. Because of the common experience being examined, the delineation of themes and descriptions are quite rich and more detailed than the descriptions of general or unspecified mystical experience. This research affirms that sexual and spiritual intimacy is a trigger to profound mystical experiences. It also demonstrates the potential of sexual intimacy and relational growth.

The "common elements" that lead to transpersonal experience deduced by Walsh and Vaughan (1993a) are supported by the results of this research. Their six components of transpersonal experience can be paralleled to the preconditions and facilitating events of the participating Christians in this study as follows: (1) Ethical training--the development of moral judgement that undermines destructive mental forces and cultivates positive mental factors--corresponds to Predisposing beliefs and expectations--understanding and living the principles of Christian faith demonstrated the participants' desire and openness to the occurrence of profound connection; (2) Attention training--willfully directing attention to objects of desire--relates to Mental and sensory preparation--focusing on intimacy and removing distractions from one's mind, emotions, will, and behaviors; (3) Emotional transformation--surrendering destructive emotions, elevating positive emotions, and gaining composure to offer unconditional acceptance--matches the participants' experiences of Revelation of Truth and Reconciliation through communication, confession, and forgiveness--through the revelation of truth about themselves or their relationships and the

forgiveness experienced in the act of reconciliation with their partners and with God, participants relinquished destructive feelings like selfishness, anger, and guilt and promoted compassion, acceptance, and security in their relationships; (4) Motivation--shifting desire towards meeting another's needs rather than selfish needs--parallels State of receptivity--becoming aware of the other's needs in a spirit of mutual desire and vulnerability; (5) Refined awareness--increasing sensory and spiritual awareness through meditation--line up with Preceding spiritual events and Communion with God--heightened awareness of God's presence in the experience of that moment in time through God's interventions and through prayer and devotion to God; (6) Wisdom--liberating the self by becoming more open and in touch with personal experience (e.g. suffering)--corresponds to the preconditions and aftereffects of the participants' experience as they became free to celebrate the fullness of the peak sexual and spiritual encounter which brought new insights, understanding, and gratefulness for the gift of intimacy with their partner and with God. It appears that the road to mystical sexual and spiritual experience among Christians in this investigation corresponds to and validates the common elements of transpersonal experience.

The mystical nature of peak religious experiences discussed by transpersonal psychologists is informed by this research. The rich thematic description provided by the contributors to this study unpacks some of the mystery of Stark's (1965) Christian "ecstatic religious experience." His understanding of divine love, intense erotic intimacy, and inclusive acceptance is illuminated and more fully rendered by the participants' narratives. Since this research relates transpersonal experience that is described by Christians, it is important to understand their mystical encounters in light of Christian theology.

Christian Theological Compatibility

As previously mentioned, the world's religions are founded upon genuine mystical experiences (Frager, 1989; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993a) and there is freedom to interpret transpersonal experience religiously and theistically (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993b). While personal experience is helpful in understanding scripture, objective biblical "truth" is the fundamental authority for Christian faith and practice (Farnsworth, 1996). This section examines how the profound sexual and spiritual encounters portrayed by the participants of this study aligns with Christian theology.

Chapter Two of this document discusses Christian theology's assertion that sexuality is part of the Creator God's image. The Trinitarian God created human gender and sexuality (Genesis 1:26-27). According to Barth (1968) and Small (1974) God's plurality is a model for human intimacy. The profound unity of the male and female relationship connecting deeply with God revealed by this study's Christian participants could be understood as an expression of "oneness" that reflects the image of the triune God. At the same time the passion of God demonstrated throughout scripture (e.g. Hosea) is informed by the experience of this study's contributors. If God's passion created human passion, human desire can be understood as a relentless returning to that place where all things are one. According to the outcomes of this study, God passionately pursued Christians by revealing truths to them and through direct intervention. At the same time, similar to the authors of the Psalms (e.g. Psalms 42 & 63), Christians passionately pursued God through prayer and meditation and discovered profound connection.

While the passion of God is evident throughout scripture, the outcomes of this study provide some subjective knowledge of God's passion. Some participants expected

judgement or rebuke from God prior to their profound sexual and spiritual experience; however, they were overwhelmed with feelings of acceptance, affirmation, and favor. The sense of fear and guilt was ameliorated as they relinquished their inhibitions and basked in the wonder of God's love. Perhaps this experience is a glimpse of "the perfect love" described by the Apostle John:

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because He first loved us. (I John 4:16,18,19).

The perfection of those passionate moments of peak sexual and spiritual connection elevated the participants beyond the limits and cares of this world to "heavenly" and "sublime" blessing.

The "mystery of one flesh" identified in the Old (Genesis 2:24) and New Testaments (Ephesians 5:32) is informed by the results of this research. The findings affirm that the union experienced in sexual intercourse within Christian marriage can include the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. The revelations of this study's participants portray connections among humans and God that are whole and complete. The rapture and depth of union experienced is mysterious and difficult to fathom. The profound themes delineated by the participants unlocks some of the "mystery" of sexual and spiritual potential.

According to the results of this study, dualism disappears during intense sexual and spiritual encounters. The body is affirmed and joins with the spirit in celebrating euphoric union. Both are vehicles of 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). When humans are reconciled to God and to one another, without separation of human dimensions--male and female, body and spirit, humanity and the cosmos--there is freedom to become "one" (Galatians 3:28). It appears that Christians can experience renewed relationships, equality, and pre-fall intimacy without the "curse's" divisive effects. (See Galatians 3 for Paul's theology of how Christ's atonement removed the consequences of the fall and the law.)

The theological tenets of Christianity and sexuality discussed in Chapter II are affirmed and experientially informed by the Christian participants who encountered profound sexual and spiritual connections. However, biases and predisposing beliefs can interpret scripture and theology in favor of particular religious experiences. As mentioned in Chapter III, Farnsworth (1990) proposes that personal religious experiences need to be subjected to some external criteria to establish their validity. Drawing on Otto's and Edwards' appeal to balance human reason and emotion in evaluating religious experience, Farnsworth (1990) modifies Lane's (1981) criteria for examining the meaning and significance of Christian religious experience into two groups of three. The first group evaluates the "adequacy" of a religious experience and includes:

1. Meaningfulness--the experience complements ordinary human experience, so that it enriches one's life.
2. Worthwhileness--the experience reaffirms one's creatureliness and reassures one's confidence in the value of life.
3. Coherence--it is possible to express the emotional aspects of the experience

rationality. (p. 59)

The "adequacy" of the profound sexual and spiritual encounter for the participants of this research is validated by descriptive stories of their experience. Meaningfulness was evident as the participants sensed deep wonder, emotional release, euphoria, passionate union, sacredness, blessing, and insight into intimacy. The profound sexual and spiritual encounter far eclipsed other experiences of intimacy and revealed the potential of passionate bonding. Their lives were enriched as they discovered the linking of sexual and spiritual realms. The worthwhileness of the religious experience is demonstrated by the participants sensing the affirming and inspiring presence of God in ways that provoked feelings of favor and gratefulness. As creatures of the Creator they expressed desire to worship God and cherish their loved ones and the cosmos more abundantly. While at times the participants of this study struggled to express their experience in words that made sense, the coherence of their experience is validated by the researcher's ability to organize their narratives into descriptive themes that comprise a "common story." The participants' direct articulations elucidate the "exhaustive description," and all of the themes were affirmed by all of the contributors.

Farnsworth's (1990) second set of criteria for evaluating religious experience is concerned with the significance or "appropriateness" of the event. These tests are:

1. Worthiness--the transcendent object upon which the experience is focused is worthy of ultimate concern and total surrender.
2. Conversion--the person's life is transformed, in behavior as well as attitude.
3. Compatibility--the experience is in harmony with the person's religious reference group.

The "appropriateness" of the sexual and spiritual experience is also validated by the accounts of this study's participants. Worthiness of the profound experience is appropriate because the object of worship and surrendering of oneself was God--the supreme being. Participants sensed God's presence and "let go" to experience passionate union with God and their lovers. It is evident that the criteria of conversion is met due to the aftereffects of healed relationships, empowerment and purpose, and the increased awareness of connection with loved ones, the world, and God. The compatibility of the sexual and spiritual experience with these participants' religious reference group--Christianity--is also validated. Although most of the participants were not expecting this mystical encounter, all of them stated that it was in accord with their theological beliefs. They also claimed that the experience enlightened scriptural passages that were previously unclear.

To decipher whether the peak sexual and spiritual experience described by the practising Christians in this study is affirmed by Christian theology, one can assess whether or not it passes the test of Farnsworth's (1990) six validating criteria and if it is confirmed by scripture. Paul's words in I Thessalonians 5:19-21 can be the guide:

Do not put out the Spirit's fire, and do not despise what is spoken in the name of the Lord. Put all things to the test, and hold on to the good.

As it has been demonstrated that the sexual/spiritual encounter is compatible with biblical theology and that it satisfies the criteria of adequacy and appropriateness, I believe it originates with God. Christians should accept this wonderful encounter as a gift to be celebrated from the personal God who is Love.

Relevance to Previous Research

Sokol's (1986) study is the only known research that examines mystical encounters that are sexual and spiritual. Her phenomenological investigation explored the transcendental states of Tantric sexual and spiritual encounters. Directly comparing the descriptive outcomes of Tantric practitioners with the thematic accounts of practising Christians leads to similarities and differences.

The thematic categories of Tantric practitioners' peak sexual and spiritual experience parallels the descriptive themes of profound sexual and spiritual connection among Christians along a number of lines. Tantric categories loss of body sense, loss of self-sense, and feelings of expansion line up with the theme of transcendence for Christian experiencers. The bliss or ecstasy and happiness themes experienced by Tantric co-researchers are similar to the euphoria category representing the Christian encounter. What Sokol (1986) refers to as "non-duality" parallels the Christian experience of intense union. Surrender and relinquishment in the Tantric encounter resembles the experience of emotional cleansing and release described by Christian contributors. Finally, both Tantric and Christian co-researchers experienced wonder, amazement, heightened sensory awareness, and the sense of mystery and paradox. It is evident that there are common features of mysticism and transpersonal experience for the two groups.

Some distinctions between the linking of sexuality and spirituality among Christians and Tantric practitioners are important to examine. A meaningful uniqueness in the Christian sexual and spiritual encounter is that it was experienced as intensely physically arousing. Orgasmic pleasure was elevated to new and wonderful heights during sexual union. On the other hand, the ecstasy state experienced by Tantric practitioners was non-

orgasmic (Sokol, 1986). Since Tantric traditions actually encourage sexual exchange without orgasm (Neff, 1981; Voigt, 1991), while mystical union among Christians includes orgasm, it appears that the peaks of sexual and spiritual connection among Christians is more holistic, involving full bodily gratification as well as emotional and spiritual highs.

Another divergent theme from Tantric experience, is the connection with Divinity experienced in Christian sexual and spiritual encounters. According to Sokol (1986), Tantric participants' accounts of transcendental sex included "the experience of the lover as a god or goddess." Although within the Christian sexual and spiritual peak experience there was a sense that one's lover was deeply valued and appreciated, the sacred presence of God was distinctly experienced. God was encountered as a third being involved in the throes of passionate intimacy. In the Christian experience, adoration, worship, and love were directed Godward. Thus, the Christian encounter meets Farnsworth's (1990) validation check for religious experience because it "reaffirms the person's creatureliness (versus deifying him or her)" (p. 61). In contrast, during the Tantric sexual and spiritual experience the lover was elevated to a "spiritual" status and the distinct presence of God seems to be missing.

While mysticism and transpersonal aspects are integral components of both Christian and Tantric sexual and spiritual connections, the qualitative differences are noteworthy. It is possible that the Tantric encounter incorporates sexuality to elicit connection with spirituality. Thus, connecting with spiritual forces is the goal of Tantric sexuality. On the other hand, the Christian experience could begin with sexual intimacy or communion with God. During the heightened passion, profound connection with God occurs. However, this "just happens;" it was not the goal of the encounter.

It is also likely that theological differences between Tantric practitioners and

practising Christians accounts for some disparity between the thematic descriptions. Tantric sexuality is based on the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism (Francoeur, 1992). These Eastern religions promote tenets such as: all is one--there are no dichotomies and no differences between God and created beings or objects; pantheism--all is God; and humanity can evolve to become god. Christianity teaches that God is distinct from the realities He created and therefore, while humans can enjoy a relationship with God, humans are not and will not become the Divinity. The philosophical dissimilarities between Christian and Tantric practitioners are no doubt responsible for the distinctiveness of the experience of Divinity within the sexual and spiritual encounter for the two groups.

Preconditions, Facilitating Events, and Effects

As mentioned in Chapter II, there is no exiting research that aims to document preconditions or events that facilitate linking sexuality and spirituality in human experience. Chapter II discusses some ideas put forth by Sokol (1986), Sovastsky (1985), and Voigt (1991) that relate to Tantric sexual practices. Sokol tangentially indicates that a relaxed state of focused attention, rituals, and delaying or foregoing orgasm promote sexual and spiritual connection. Sovastsky suggests ontological contexts such as temporality, place, and embodiment encourage interaction between sexuality and spirituality. Voigt proposes five Tantric based explorations that enhance intimacy among couples that include: rituals, synchronized breathing, eye contact, motionless intercourse, and non-orgasmic intercourse. Parallels that exist between the suggested conditions that promote sexual and spiritual connection within Tantric traditions and the investigated findings among Christians include preconditions of mental and sensory preparation, including rituals, and states of receptivity. The results of this research empirically informs existing opinions of previous researchers.

Outcomes of this study specifically reveal the events and conditions that facilitate sexual and spiritual connection among Christians. Distinct facilitating events that are illuminated can be linked to existing research. The "revelation of truth" incident is a spiritual experience (Ammerman, 1990; Chavez-Garcia & Helminiak, 1985) that promotes intimate self-awareness (Bilotta, 1981) as well as a sexual experience that encourages vulnerability and self-disclosure (Reiss, 1986). This event is in accord with Kleinplatz's (1996) research that discovered honesty is a primary facilitator of passionate erotic encounters. At times antecedent incidents such as "communion with God" and "preceding spiritual events" may encourage the self-examination required to reveal the truth. Accepting the truth allowed the participants of this research to "come clean" and be freed (John 8:32) to authentically experience sexual and spiritual connection.

Research by Hill and Preston (1996) and Watt and Ewing (1996) demonstrates that criticism and accumulated resentments are the greatest obstacles to emotional and sexual closeness within human relationships. Relinquishing the embeddedness of past hurts and wrongs through confession and forgiveness promotes a clearer pathway to intimacy. Forgiveness acknowledges "co-inherence" or "the principle that human relationships are mutually indwelling" and "whatever happens to a single person has consequences for all other persons" (McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1995, p. 355). Thus, forgiveness is a bonding or joining experience that acknowledges all humans transgress and all humans need to offer and receive forgiveness. The process of reconciliation is fully supported by Christian theology (see Chapter II; II Corinthians 5:18-20) and restores relationships between humans and between humans and God so that sexual and spiritual energies can have full potential to strive for mystical, passionate union.

The results of this study that particularly stand out are the transforming and healing effects experienced by the Christian co-researchers who encountered profound sexual and spiritual connection. It was a therapeutic experience. Not only were internal conflicts and relational discord resolved, empowerment and purpose filled participants' lives with meaning and direction. Elevated passion and greater abilities to connect with loved ones, God, and the cosmos were experienced. A marked development of faith and spiritual closeness with God occurred as a result of the intense sexual and spiritual encounter. There was increased potential for reconciling dualism between body and spirit, humanity and nature, and man and woman. The aftereffects of the mystical experience revealed promotion of human functioning in relation to self, others, and God. Without attempting to understate the obvious, the enrichment of personhood and relationships as well as sexual and spiritual growth are desirable outcomes.

In summary, the results of this study provide valuable information about how the Christian participants experienced and made meaning of their profound sexual and spiritual encounters. An important implication is that it provides an empirical basis for what has previously amounted to opinions from researchers and theologians. The outcomes uncovered the common facilitating conditions and events that existed for this group of Christians. The significant and healing aftereffects of the intense sexual and spiritual union were also revealed. The findings have informed understanding about the phenomenon and have pointed to the potential of developing passionate connection with oneself, another human, and God.

Limitations of the Study

There are several factors that limit this investigation and restrict interpretations. Chapter III documents three limitations of this study under the heading "Generalizability of Results." First, the results cannot be easily generalized at this time. In addition to only interviewing ten practising Christians from Western Canada, the majority of the participants were well-educated--nine had university credits and four had master's degrees. Future studies with a less educated group from more rural areas may add to the generalizability of the thematic categories.

Generalizability of the results of this study are further restricted due to sexual orientation and ethnic factors. Participants in this study were heterosexual and primarily Caucasian. It is not known how these results reflect sexual and spiritual connections among same-sexed relationships or people of different ethnicity (e.g. Asian). It is also important to note that the contributors to this study were active in their spiritual faith and were involved in long-term committed relationships. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be easily generalized to people without active spiritual faith and strong intimate relationships.

A second limitation of this research is that the thematic description of the profound sexual and spiritual connection was derived through self-reporting rather than observation. It is possible that some events and meaningful descriptors were not mentioned, even though they were validated twice by the contributors, due to memory loss. Another shortcoming in using self-reporting is that participants could only report what they could articulate. Linguistic research demonstrates the inadequacy of language. According to Malone and Malone (1987) human experience contains far more than rendered meanings.

Finally, the influence of the researcher may have affected the research process. Due to the sensitive nature of the phenomenon being examined, it is possible that the gender of the researcher may have impacted the interviews and interpretations, especially among the female participants. Future research of this kind might enlist female researchers to interview the female contributors.

In response to the limitations of this study mentioned above, it is important to note that phenomenological research focuses upon meaning rather than facts. Different interviewers or different co-researchers produce situations which are never repeatable but which provide multiple perspectives which can lead to a more unified description of a shared phenomenon (Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 1986). The interpretations of this researcher are guided by validity and reliability checks described in Chapter III and are supported by references to the data. A key question is “whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw” (Kvale, 1994, p. 192).

Research Implications and Recommendations

Before cataloguing the issues that are deserving of future research attention, it is important to note that Christians were given a voice to describe a phenomenon that was previously unexplored within their faith framework. Descriptive results of the sexual and spiritual experience contradict dualistic notions inherited from early Christian church leaders. Public images of sex being incompatible with religion in Western society are challenged by this research. The results of this study reveal that Christian experience of sexuality can promote enlightening knowledge of sexual intimacy for Western culture. The

experience of practising Christians demonstrates some of the passionate potential of intimate connection. Future explorations of sexual functioning among Christians may discover more of the dynamic mystery of human sexuality.

Although the perspectives that relate sexuality and spirituality on the bases of common origins and similarity of energy flow are supported by the results of this study, further exploration is required to more fully explicate the relationship between these two dimensions along these grounds. Perhaps sexual and spiritual origins and energies are only connected within Christian experience during profound or peak sexual and spiritual encounters. In less intense experiences the linking of sexuality and spirituality may be less noticeable and without as much meaning.

The themes elucidated in this study, separately and taken as a whole, may be used as a starting point for further research. Colaizzi (1978) believes that the existential meaning of the phenomenological thesis is that research can never be complete. Future exploration might involve replicating this study to determine if new information and descriptive categories could be obtained. Replication might help to refine, extend, or revise the themes, adding to our understanding of the essence and pathway to mystical sexual and spiritual connection among Christians. Generalizability of the results might be investigated by exploring the profound sexual and spiritual phenomenon with contributors of different ages, education, denominational backgrounds, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Personality traits of those Christians who experience peak sexual and spiritual connection could be valuable information gained through further research. For example, the participants' extrinsic or intrinsic orientation towards spirituality could be assessed using the Allport and Ross (1967) "Personal Religious Orientation Scale." The kind of human

motivation toward spirituality may be significantly related to the ability to experience such profound connection. Levels of developmental maturity may also be a factor in encountering intense union of sexual and spiritual urges. Possibly it is only those who are willing to actively seek the full spiritual or sexual union that are mature enough to actually experience it. Psychological tests could be used to assess maturity levels or other specific personality traits that might be influential in facilitating this full expression of passionate intimacy. Also, measurements of "spiritual well-being" before and after these passionate encounters could indicate the effects of the profound experience.

Other quantitative methods might be incorporated to gain more insights into the sexual and spiritual connection. The style of love germane to those who experience the linking of sexuality and spirituality might be assessed by any number of love scales. For example, scales that utilize Sternberg's (1988) model of love might be used to explore levels of passion, intimacy, or commitment involved in these intense encounters.

With the meaning and experience of linking sexuality and spirituality demarcated by this study as background, future research could be directed toward understanding how the two energies become confused in professional and therapeutic relationships. Distinctions between "illegitimate" and "legitimate" experiences might be drawn. Understanding how spiritual and helping connections can be confused with erotic longings would benefit "helpers" and "helpees" alike.

Implications for Practice

In terms of practice, the results of this study have a number of important implications for counsellors, educators, and clergy. In the counselling situation the counsellor has the opportunity to become a co-explorer with the client (Claspell, 1984). It was significant that, at various times throughout the interviews, the co-researchers commented on their need to share and discuss the profound sexual and spiritual experience as it happened. During the follow-up interviews, contributors expressed that reading the protocols, themes, and "common story" validated their experience. All of the participants mentioned that the telling of their stories as well as the reading of their "situated structural description" and the collective story that emerged provided relief, joy, and further clarification of important issues for them. They felt "pleased" and "deeply moved" as their story was reflected back to them. It was reassuring for them to know they shared the experience with others. Some sensed more confidence and boldness to share their profound experience with others. Given that there was no information about sexual and spiritual experience for Christians prior to this study, the collective story that emerged from this research provided useful insights for the contributors and will no doubt be helpful for other Christians who have encountered this phenomenon. This process also suggests that recording, transcribing, and sharing written themes that emerge from clients' stories would be a valuable counselling tool.

As mentioned in Chapter I, clients are better served by clinicians who process their own sexual and spiritual convictions. Since most potential consumers of counselling services in North America prefer to visit therapists who represent spiritual values and beliefs (Peteet, 1994), the results of this research can inform counsellors and helping professionals

by providing insights into sexuality and spirituality that would aid in formulating values and philosophies. The themes of sexual and spiritual connection increase understanding of the potential of sexual and spiritual development. Counsellors, educators, and clergy, regardless of religious orientation, can now be aware that this phenomenon is within the range of Christian experience and that it is desirable and valuable for the experiencer.

According to Stewart and Gale (1994), 81% of clients prefer counsellors who enable them to integrate their values and belief system into the counselling process. Ingersoll (1994) strongly proposes that counsellors become sensitive to clients' spiritual and religious worldviews. He suggests that counselling can be enhanced by affirming the importance of the clients' spirituality in their lives and by attempting to enter their belief system with congruent vocabulary and imagery in conceptualizing problems and treatment. The results of the current research provide a theological and experiential basis for understanding a positive and healthy orientation for Christian sexuality. Christian clients who require help in their sexual functioning would be more greatly aided by counsellors who could attend to a spiritual worldview that affirms human sexuality and its relation to spirituality.

Counsellors would also benefit by coming to grips with their own development in relating the sexual and spiritual. The "person" of the therapist affects fundamental aspects of clinical practice. The therapist's differentiation is an important variable in his or her ability to maintain clinical neutrality, tolerate the intimacy of counselling relationships, and uphold clinical integrity. Understanding the dynamic relationship between sexuality and spirituality increases awareness and potential defenses against sexual affairs between counsellors and clients.

The findings of this research suggest a pathway toward healing and holistic sexual

and spiritual connection for Christians. As this "map" did not exist previous to this study, it is now possible for practitioners to utilize the events and preconditions toward sexual and spiritual connection in their practice to facilitate holistic intimacy and relational growth. This practical map has implications for counselling, counsellor training, program development, education, and Christian clergy.

Counsellors could find the outcomes of this study useful in developing techniques or interventions that address sexual dysfunction and relational discord within the Christian community. Couples could be instructed and encouraged to develop more holistic approaches to sexual relations. Promoting factors that foster physical, emotional, and spiritual union might facilitate healing of sexual and relational issues. Some examples are: encouraging vulnerability and disclosure of truth; joint confession and forgiveness; communion with God as an integral aspect of sexual intimacy; preparing for more holistic intimacy through rituals such as prayer, meditation, listening to worshipful or passionate music, and reading the mystics or the "Song of Songs;" selflessly attending to one's lover's needs first; and focusing on God's gift of sexuality and the gift of the loved one. While it is not known whether these practices would result in a peak sexual and spiritual experience for all clients, it is likely that such factors would increase holistic intimacy and some restoration of passionate union.

Restructuring sexual experience by breaking down conditioned practices and beliefs might promote couples to more wholly consecrated intimacy. The experience of "letting go" or surrendering control is a central theme in facilitating human ability for sexual abandonment as well as spiritually trusting in God (David & Duda, 1977). Anderson (1994) discusses how Divine intervention can initiate relinquishment or "letting go" of efforts to

obtain another's love and facilitate therapeutic change for couples. The findings of this study could guide Christians in the process of "letting go" and reassure them about what might happen if they did.

Education regarding a positive theological view toward the goodness of sexuality would likely enhance expectations about holistic intimacy potential. For example promoting a theological affirmation of the human body might encourage Christians to "glorify God through their bodies," rather than be ashamed of their physical being. Understanding God's passion, the Trinity love relationship, and God's longing to connect with His people promotes a spirituality that includes passionate connection with God. According to the findings of this study, this kind of spiritual fervor can be experienced by single Christians as well as those in intimate relationships. Unpacking some of the mysterious potential of "one flesh" intimacy within marriage using biblical texts and the results of this study informs Christians and others of the potential for committed intimacy.

In light of the positive biblical view and the results of this study, the significance of sexual intimacy is not diminished but expanded. Sexual play is a recreational activity and much more. The mutual self-exposure and cleaving of sexual activity arise from and satisfy the human need for intimate communion with a loved one. Seen in this context, the biblical laws against promiscuity and adultery are not prohibitions against pleasure. Rather, they point us toward deeper pleasures--the delicious pleasures of affection, playfulness, intimacy, and orgasm within the unity and security of marriage. God therefore cautions us not against pleasure, but against pleasures that are too weak, too unsatisfying for God's favorite creatures. It appears that if the Bible advises restraint of human longings and passion it is not because God forbids the pleasures humans were created to enjoy, but because God has

better things in store for us--a more fully human sexuality.

Because of the connection between sexuality and spirituality demonstrated by the contributors to this research, professionals and the general public should recognize that factors in human experience that promote spiritual growth also can promote sexual growth. At the same time, conditions that advance sexual and passionate functioning can encourage spiritual development. As people increase self-awareness and vulnerability, engage in spiritual values and principles, find reverence in the moment, express passion, think of the unfamiliar, draw nearer to God, and become aware of wonder, awe, and ultimate meanings, higher levels of development can be gained. Linking the core components of sexuality and spirituality encourages further travel down this path.

Conclusions

This study investigated the meaning and experience of profound sexual and spiritual encounters among practising Christians. Exploration of the conditions and events that promote these mystical experiences as well as the personal and relational effects of connecting sexually and spiritually was also conducted.

The results of this research illuminated twenty-five major themes as produced through phenomenological methodology. The "common story" of profound sexual and spiritual connection for Christians reveal that this experience is healing, transforming, and encourages development of the whole person and relationships. The findings reinforce and build upon theories of love and transpersonal experience as well as provide empirical knowledge that informs existing opinions and theologies regarding sexual and spiritual connection.

The outcomes of this study contribute to the field of counselling psychology by providing an experiential understanding of sexual and spiritual encounters and elucidating a reasonably comprehensive scheme of categories, from the perspective of practising Christians, that promote this healing and evolving experience. This study suggests promising developments in the potential of human sexual intimacy that have implications for both research and practice.

Spirituality is a relevant component of human sexuality. More relational and human potential will be discovered as the gifts of sexuality and spirituality are celebrated.

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Books.

APPENDIX A
BRACKETING

Bracketing or Personal Dialogue

Because one's biases affect the way in which information is gathered and interpreted, researchers using the existential-phenomenological method must be alert to their own preconceptions and presuppositions. Instead of attempting to avoid such influences through traditional experimental design, the researcher accepts Osborne's (1990) statement:

"Existential-phenomenology recognizes the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of what are the data, the collection of the data, and their interpretation" (p. 81). The phenomenological researcher concedes to assumptions and predispositions through "bracketing," a process of rigorous self-reflection. In this process the researcher intensely reviews the biases that he or she may bring to the investigation in order to make these preconceptions explicit to both the researcher and the reader (Valle et al., 1989) and hold them in abeyance. After acknowledging the orientation of the researcher, the reader can determine how well that perspective has illuminated the subject.

This section describes my relationship to the topic as well as my evolving understanding that there could be a connection between sexuality and spirituality. Honestly acknowledging my experiences and assumptions in linking sexual and spiritual experience enables me to embark on the study of this phenomenon as "known."

I am a Christian who was raised in a conservative Christian home. Although there was much love and commitment between my parents and within the family, sexuality was not discussed. As my sexuality burgeoned during my adolescent years I experienced feelings of arousal, curiosity, and longing, conflicting with confusion, fear, and guilt. Since sex was such a private and forbidden topic I reserved my feelings to my personal world.

Committing to marriage at a young age (19) I experienced the intimacy of sexual

connection. Although I certainly enjoyed the physical and emotional experience, I often had a sense that this was much larger than a biological release. Some friends and acquaintances seemed to be quite consumed with the possibilities of having as many sexual liaisons as possible. Again, although they experienced physical enjoyment, some of them admitted it was becoming difficult to really "connect" and "let go" with another person. There was something that prohibited real passion.

During my later youth and young adulthood my Christian faith had become more important, but at times it seemed to be based more on values and "dos and don'ts." I had a personal relationship with God, but, again, there was a desire for something deeper. The term "spirituality" was uncommon at this time of my life, and I admit feeling some caution towards "spiritual experience," but I knew I desired to discover more about meaningful purpose and connection with truth. Therefore I embarked on an education in psychology and continued my learning until achieving a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology.

After moving to California to commence a teaching and counselling profession, I experientially discovered much about myself and the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Some specific events led to queries about the potential for linking these two core dimensions of life. Through counselling clients and gaining supervision I became more aware of my own states of emotional and spiritual energies. I was encouraged to be more in touch with my inner hunches and be more experientially open to my feelings. I discovered that there were times during counselling others that I would be prompted by some deep intuitive force to ask a question or discern a problem. In my understanding, this was God spiritually directing me as I gained insight and connection with the client's feelings and issues. Although these experiences did not occur frequently, they were very affirming and uplifting and caused me to

be more open to experiential spiritual connection.

Other incidents provoked interest in spirituality and sexuality. In pre-marital counselling with college students I discovered that many felt it was much more difficult to restrain their sexual passions if they prayed together. Arousal of the spiritual connection to God seemed to engender erotic energies. I also found that some clients who suffered from sexual distress or unfulfillment experienced significant relief and resolution when they had a meaningful spiritual experience. On the other hand, clients who were frustrated in their attempts to find connection with God often, to their amazement, realized God's closeness following or during a profound sexual connection.

As I matured and gained fuller understanding of myself and my wife, I also discovered more fully satisfying sexual and emotional connection. Although I was approaching middle-age and beyond the prime of genital sexuality, I attributed my enhanced intimacy with my wife to knowing her better and to my own spiritual growth.

I began reading mystics such as Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich and was fascinated by their deeply passionate connection with God. Informed about the passionate nature of God, my spiritual relationship to God became more arousing and connecting. At the same time, teaching upper level human sexuality courses to undergraduate and graduate students forced me to educate myself about more holistic sexuality.

Acquainted with the Christian church's reserve and reticence to discuss sexuality, except in what tended to be more judgmental and restrictive ways, I resolved to seek for further "truth" about human sexuality. Searching the Bible, I found there were more positive and mysterious passages about sexuality than there were negative or restraining messages. I

also discovered that seminars about Tantric sexual practices that led to "transcendental sex" were very much in vogue in the 1990s. People seemed more intrigued about spiritual matters as well as dissatisfied with previous sexual mores.

Curiosity, the belief that sexuality could be informed by Christian experience, and the persuasion that Eastern religious practitioners were not the only persons who could experience sexual and spiritual connection spurred me forward. I began reading the literature on sexual and spiritual connection, especially looking for the relation to Christian experience. Discussing my findings with several people prompted them to reveal very private, but wonderful sexual encounters that included connection with a passionate God.

In 1994 I wrote two articles that articulated some of my thoughts to that point. "Sexuality and Spirituality: In Search of Common Ground" was published in the fall of 1997 in the Journal of Psychology and Christianity. This article attempts to construct a philosophical basis for connecting these two dimensions along common origins of incompleteness and the human yearning for wholeness as well as along the parallelism of desire and function. The other major paper, "Peak Sexual and Spiritual Experience: Exploring the Mystical Relationship," was published in 1996 in the Journal of Theology and Sexuality. In this work I incorporated Pahnke's (1980) transpersonal typology of mystical experience to relate peak potentials for sexuality and spirituality. I proposed both peak sexual and peak spiritual encounters are characterized by his themes of unity, transcendence, deep positive moods, sacredness, objectivity and reality, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency, and persisting positive effects. Both of these articles were philosophical inquiries, without empirical or experiential support.

My task in this current research was to discover the "real" or "lived" experience of

sexual and spiritual connection by investigating the meaning and description of these profound encounters with Christian contributors. I also wanted to discover the aftereffects of such mystical experiences. Were they maturing and good? Furthermore, if this was a desirable encounter, I believed it was valuable to understand the pathway or conditions that might lead to more holistic intimacy.

APPENDIX B
INFORMATION LETTER SENT TO CHURCHES

July 15, 1996

Dear receptionist, pastor, or counselor,

My name is Chuck MacKnee. I am a professor of psychology at Trinity Western University where I have taught for the past seven years. I have also been counselling professionally for thirteen years and am currently completing my doctorate from UBC in counselling psychology. Presently I am doing research for my dissertation that investigates the link between sexuality and spirituality. The July issue of Christian Info NEWS (pages 4-6) includes a brief article that describes some of the background of my study.

Sexuality and spirituality are very sensitive and private dimensions of human experience. Abuse and misuse of these core components of life have led to inappropriate separation or connection of sexuality and spirituality. I believe there is more to discover and celebrate about the vital mystery of the "one flesh" experience God designed.

The purpose of this study is to give practising Christians a voice in describing the facilitating events and experience of sexual and spiritual intensity that occur together. Results will provide counselors, educators, and clergy with initial knowledge of the composition of and pathway to healthy sexual and spiritual relationships. This could lead to theory development, exploration of sexual and spiritual potential, more holistic views of human nature, and potential interventions for addressing Christians' sexual issues.

Enclosed you will find a poster that identifies my research and calls for participants. I would greatly appreciate your help in posting the flyer and directing any practising Christians who might qualify for this study toward me. Confidentiality is ensured and contributors will receive a small honorarium.

Please address any inquiries to me by phone or mail and I'll be happy to provide further information.

Thank you for your help and time.

Sincerely,

Chuck MacKnee
Psychology Professor
Trinity Western University
7600 Glover Road
Langley, B.C. V2Y 1Y1, 888-7511

APPENDIX C
POSTER ADVERTISING STUDY



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Regardless of which religion, culture, or period of history, the mysterious relationship between sexuality and spirituality has been a topic of discussion. Some religions view sexuality as integral to spiritual growth. Christian mystics such as Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avilia used erotically graphic language to convey the rapture and intimacy of their experience with God. Although Christians are influenced by a dualistic heritage that depreciates the sexual body and glorifies the eternal spirit, many theorists propose that reconciling and relating the core human dimensions of sexuality and spirituality facilitates the growth of the whole person and of human relationships. Research that investigates the descriptions of those who have experienced intense or profound spiritual and sexual arousal simultaneously is necessary to develop more meaningful understanding of this phenomenon. If you are a practising Christian who has experienced a profound event that could accurately be described as sexual as well as spiritual and wish to contribute to this study please contact Chuck MacKnee, UBC Counselling Psychology Doctoral Student, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Trinity Western University, at TWU, 7600 Glover Road, Langley, B.C., V2Y 1Y1, 888-7511. Further information will be forwarded to you.

Chuck MacKnee is a doctoral student who is investigating the description and facilitation of intense experiences that are sexual and spiritual among Christian practitioners. This research is intended to fulfill the dissertation requirements for the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at UBC. Chuck MacKnee is a psychology professor at Trinity Western University and has been teaching psychology and human sexuality for the past 12 years. He has 13 years experience as a professional counselor in individual and couple therapy at several community and private counselling centers in United States and Canada.

APPENDIX D
DISPLAY ADVERTISEMENT IN PERIODICALS

APPENDIX E

LETTER DESCRIBING STUDY SENT TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Department of Counselling Psychology
 Faculty of Education
 2125 Main Mall
 Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: (604) 822-5259
 Fax: (604) 822-2328

Dear :

You have expressed interest in participating in my doctoral study. This research is being conducted to discover descriptions and the facilitating events of intense experiences that are jointly sexual and spiritual among practising Christians.

Participation will involve an initial 45-60 minute interview and a shorter follow-up meeting. In the interview, you will be asked to recall a profound experience when the terms sexual and spiritual accurately described that human event. You will then be asked to fully describe this experience and identify the factors that helped or facilitated bringing about this phenomenon. Interviews will be tape recorded, transcribed and given a number code to ensure confidentiality. The tapes will be erased upon completion of the study. After completion of the interview you will receive a \$20 honorarium.

The purpose of these interviews is to develop a thematic description and categorical framework of what facilitates relating sexuality and spirituality among people who practice Christianity. In addition to learning more about human wholeness and intimacy, this description and categorical framework could impact counselors, pastors, and educators who counsel and teach individuals and couples about sexual and human potential.

Your involvement is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. All responses are strictly confidential. A number will be the only means of identification once the interview is completed.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete and return the attached consent form to me in the self-addressed/stamped envelope and I will contact you to arrange a suitable interview time. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

Chuck MacKnee (Ph.D. student in Counselling Psychology, UBC)
 Assistant Professor of Psychology
 Trinity Western University
 7600 Glover Road, Langley, B.C. V2Y 1Y1
 Tel: (604) 888-7511

APPENDIX F
CONSENT FORM