The Embodied Experience of Grace as Maternal Embrace

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis, submitted for assessment, is the result of my own work, and no unacknowledged assistance has been received in its planning, drafting, execution or writing. All sources on which it is based have been acknowledged in writing, as has the supervision I have received in the process of its preparation.

Name:

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This thesis explores the embodied, vital and life-giving experience of God’s grace in people’s lives. People don’t only think about God and make statements about God, people encounter God who loves, heals, blesses and embraces. Revealed in Creation, incarnate in Jesus Christ and present through the Holy Spirit, God’s very nature is to come from the beyond of promise into the now of experience. God comes into every time and place and lives with human beings in intimate relationship, bringing blessing beyond articulation. This is God’s grace at work in human living.

When I have sat in spiritual direction and created a holding space in which people can tell their stories, I have witnessed the transformative and empowering work of grace in people’s lives. I have seen people healed and sensed them being blessed. In the contemplative environment of spiritual direction, attention is given to God’s grace at play, thereby enabling people to grow into their true giftedness and calling as children of God. I have also experienced in my own life, God’s grace bring healing, transformation, hope and invitation.

This thesis emerges from a desire to point to the power of grace as an embodied experience in human lives. I hope to share my passion for the sometimes hidden ministry of spiritual direction, and to respond to the theological critique of embodied human experience that I have encountered in the modern, western, protestant tradition. As a way of apprehending the embodied experience of God’s grace, I will employ the metaphor of maternal embrace. Maternal embrace provides a powerful and widely resonating metaphor for the way in which people encounter and experience God’s grace.
INTRODUCTION

May the grace
Of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
Be with you all.
Now, and ever more.
Amen. ¹

Many statements are made about God's grace in Christian life and liturgy. We pray for and call upon God's grace, and offer thanks for God's graciousness. When asked, however, to name and reflect upon our human encounters with God's grace, the church becomes strangely quiet. We call upon our God to be present in worship, respond to petitions in prayer, feed us in the Eucharist and bestow blessings upon us. Yet, descriptions of personal experience of grace are often viewed with suspicion. Can the grace described by Christian theology as freely given be embodied in human experience?

The Greek word for grace, charis, conveys ‘rejoicing’. Charis is also used objectively for ‘charm’ and ‘beauty’; subjectively for ‘kindness’, ‘goodwill’, and ‘gratitude’; and concretely for ‘favour’, ‘gratitude’ and ‘delight’.² For Paul, grace is a sign of God's generous love, which comes as a gift in salvation, opening up a new world of blessing (Rom. 3: 23-26). Grace is not merely a description of God's disposition, it is God's act of self-giving. Grace also has an effectual sense in that it becomes effective in the lives of human beings. Grace

¹ Uniting in Worship, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 661.
Based on 2 Cor. 13: 14.
inspires gifts in people in the form charismata, grace gifts (Rom. 12: 6). In this sense, grace is both the action of God's self-giving and the fruit of God's self-giving. An expanded discussion of grace will follow. To begin however it is helpful to define God's grace as the action and out working of God's self-communication. ³

The ministry of spiritual direction has its origins in human beings throughout history offering one another companionship, guidance and counsel, and seeking the God’s guidance in their living. The scriptures describe people, whether priests, prophets, wisdom figures, rabbis and ordinary folk seeking God’s guidance. Jesus provides the Christian tradition with a model for spiritual direction as he guided people toward living in abiding relationship with God. Jesus offers his disciples companionship, teaching and guidance as they seek God and invites them to discover the Holy Spirit in their midst. There are many examples of early Christians seeking a spiritual companion to accompany them in their faith journey. St. Paul speaks of the beginners in faith who need to be fed with milk and the mature who can be fed with solid food (1 Cor. 2:13-16; 3:2). Beginning in the third century, a more formal movement of spiritual direction began when Christian people moved into the desert and developed religious communities. ‘There we see the birth of the desert abba and the search for him by those needing help in the arduous, dangerous, promising, tempting life of desert spiritual combat.’⁴ Spiritual direction has been taken up by the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions and seen many forms over the centuries. Protestant traditions emerging from the Enlightenment rejected forms where authority figures appeared to be mediating and potentially manipulating God’s Word. Correspondingly, they were suspicious of one-on-one spiritual direction. Yet, other forms of spiritual companioning developed. For example, Methodist class meetings offered group spiritual direction. The late 20th century has seen a re-emergence of spiritual direction in the protestant tradition with a growing community of people training in this ministry and providing spiritual direction.

This is the church in its smallest form (Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them. Matthew 18:20) In a time of great ferment, we could say that this minimal gathering is an opportunity to find the wheat amidst the chaff in the chaos of life, a chance to sink our roots deeper in heaven, where ‘moth and rust don’t consume’ (Matt 6:19).  

In the context of the ministry of spiritual direction people are encouraged to describe moments in their lives when they sense the grace of God in daily living. Spiritual direction nurtures the desire to be led by the Holy Spirit as a fundamental aspect of Christian faith. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans: ‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God’ (Rom. 8: 17). The ministry of spiritual direction provides a setting for a contemplative dialogue between ‘pilgrim’ and ‘guide’, where the focus is on listening for the movements of God’s grace in the pilgrim’s daily life. Spiritual direction begins with the assumption that ‘God continues to communicate the divine presence and life to human beings.’ Safe, contemplative space is created in which to explore embodied encounters with God’s grace. However, not every experience described in spiritual direction is an expression of God's grace. A vital aspect of spiritual direction is discernment by which the pilgrim develops their ability to test and explore experiences for signs of the fruits of God’s grace.

This thesis seeks to move beyond statements about grace to explore the dynamics of God's self-communication - God's grace as lived experience embodied in people's lives. People eat, cry, tell stories, think, feel, dream, dance, bleed and give birth as embodied beings. All the action, feelings and thoughts that constitute our lives occur in and through our bodies. Thus the body is central to human experience and as such to our experiences of, and responses to, God's self-communication.

As a starting point for my research, I describe an experience of maternal embrace from my

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own life experience in which I sense the grace of God at work. My story is an example of the material frequently discussed in spiritual direction conversation. Many texts about spiritual direction offer listening, psychological and discernment tools for exploring the experience. This thesis seeks to provide a theological foundation for claiming an embodied experience as an experience of grace, and the *maternal embrace* as such an experience and as a rich metaphor for the experience of grace.

Claiming that an encounter with God’s grace is an embodied experience involves making significant theological assumptions. Firstly, spiritual direction assumes that God's grace can be experienced as embodied in human living. Secondly, it assumes that a particular encounter is an experience of God's grace. Neither of these assumptions sits easily in the cultural context of modern western theology.

Chapter One explores issues surrounding the theology of the human experience of God. It proposes that because God is self-revealing, human beings can encounter God’s grace. Chapter Two offers an historical account of the theology of grace and argues that grace, by definition, can be encountered in human experience. Chapter Three discusses an embodied understanding of theological anthropology, whereby God’s grace can be encountered as embodied in human living. In these chapters, a theological framework for considering the experience of *maternal embrace* as an embodied experience of God’s grace emerges. The final chapter returns to my experience of *maternal embrace*. The discernment tools of spiritual direction are applied to the *maternal embrace* experience and *maternal embrace* is explored as a metaphor for an embodied experience of grace.

For the purposes of this thesis, I offer reflection on my own experience as a moment in which we may glimpse God's grace embodied in my living. I am currently giving much of my time and energy to the care of three young children, alongside of which I am a Uniting Church minister offering spiritual direction. I have nappies to change, meals to prepare, stories to

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7 For ethical reasons, I will only draw on examples from my own life experience. Listening to people share stories in spiritual direction conversations I have, however, witnessed many examples of what may be embodied experiences of grace.
read, work to do, cuddles to share, sermons to write, washing to hang out, arguments to arbitrate and a house to clean. I have sensed God’s presence with me in the midst of all this activity. I also have pilgrims coming to me for spiritual direction with their hearts open to exploring the movements of God's Spirit. By the grace of God, I sense myself drawn more and more deeply into the life and body of Christ. I have come to realise that God’s grace cannot be confined to a concept about God. Instead, I have discovered an openness to encounter God's grace within and through my embodied lived experience.

In my current context, I have a growing sense of God's grace reflected through my experience of maternal embrace. Maternal embrace is motherly holding, where a mother’s body can be physically holding, enclosing or protecting. Maternal embrace also extends beyond the physical to emotional and spiritual nurturing, enabling and enduring. Maternal embrace surges forth with the strongest impulse of love, nurture and protection, which is not limited to the biological mother. Maternal embrace is not necessarily gendered either. Men can share with their children an embrace that echoes the qualities I describe here as maternal embrace. Maternal embrace is, however, a feminine metaphor reflecting the feminine characteristics of the human personality, energy and attributes. Feminine metaphors are much needed in a cultural context where masculine images and metaphors have been in predominance. Indeed, God's maternal embrace of humanity has many scriptural references, the most well known being God’s longing to gather her children to her breast like the mother hen with her chicks huddled under her wing (Luke 13: 34). Building upon the Biblical precedents expanding on my own experience, I intend to reveal the power of maternal embrace as metaphor for the embodied experience of grace.

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8 The woman who introduced me to the phrase maternal embrace was not a mother. Yet, she described a feeling of maternal strength welling up in her as she held someone else’s child. She also described sensing God embracing her and giving her strength as she embraced the child.
A LIVED EXPERIENCE

I was suffering. I'd been through six months of conflict in my workplace, which left me feeling battered and abused. At last, on holiday, my defenses down, I could no longer hold back tears. I felt myself crumble under the weight of accumulated stress and found myself retreating from the company of others. Yet, as the mother of three young children, wife and manager of a household, I could not remove myself completely. I was called back into the tasks of daily living by my family. In my fragile state, they stepped around me carefully. Feeling drained of energy, weak and hopeless, I wondered how I would survive this sense of desolation.

Then one evening I noticed that something in my sense of self had shifted. I felt lighter and more present to the people around me. That morning I'd woken feeling confused and stressed, but by the evening I felt more relaxed. I sensed a movement, a weight had been lifted; I felt more alive again. A sense of despair had been replaced by one of hopefulness. I lay in bed that night and wondered how the shift had happened. I prayed an ‘Awareness Examen’ prayer and turned my awareness to God as I recalled the events of the day.⁹

As I prayed and reflected back on the day, my thoughts rested at the time after lunch when I took my 18-month-old son into the bedroom for his afternoon sleep. I held him chest to chest; his little arms clasped strong and tight around my neck. I could feel the caress of little hands as he pulled me closer. I sat on the bed and began to relax. Slowly I leaned back and lay down on the bed as he held me. I felt the bed receive us as we embraced each other. With his

⁹ The Awareness Examen is a form of prayer in the Ignatian tradition. The prayer has two parts. First is an examen of consciousness through which we become aware of how God has been present to us during the day and how we have responded to that loving presence. The second is an examen of the conscience in which we uncover those areas of our experience that need healing, blessing and restoring. In this way, the Examen teaches us how to discern God’s footprints in our lives as we foster openness to the Holy Story shaping our own story.
little form pressing onto my chest, a thought crossed my mind: 'This might be what it feels like to be embraced by God'. And there, for a while, we waited. Aware of the need to put my son to bed, I sat up, completed the task and left the room.

As I reflected on this experience it became clear to me that in this embrace, my son and I embodied the transforming grace of God. The idea that this might be what it feels like to be embraced by God shifted from being a thought to becoming knowledge, from an idea to an awareness of embodied experience. It is a moment which could easily pass unnoticed, diminished or hidden as are, I suspect, many such moments. Instead, I feel compelled to claim this moment as an embodied experience of God's grace.
Chapter 1

EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This thesis proposes that people encounter grace as an embodied experience and introduces maternal embrace as a metaphor for such experiences. Before reclaiming embodiment from the exile it has suffered at the hand of ancient and Cartesian dualism, exploring the meaning of grace or the metaphor of maternal embrace, it is necessary to create first a theological framework for discussing the human experience of God. This chapter, therefore, explores the theology of experience.

In the introduction to a collection of essays on the experience of God, Kevin Hart describes the spectrum of debate among theologians and philosophers about the human experience of God. Metaphysical theologians argue that God as an infinite being cannot be experienced by finite human beings. They also argue that the experience of individual human beings is subjective and that subjective experience cannot provide normative information for theology. At this end of the debate, to suggest that human beings can experience God is seen as reducing theology to anthropology. In contrast, others theologians reminded us that if God is not accessible to human experience then theology is nothing but empty words. The scriptures, after all, are grounded in stories about human beings experiencing God.

The life of the church is full of references to humanity encountering the life of the divine. However, exploring the practical and experiential dimensions of this relationship is often resisted in the liberal protestant church, which is my heritage. This resistance isolates the ministry of spiritual direction, with its focus on the experience of God. Navigating a path

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through the debate about experience is an important foundational task in the development of a theology of spiritual direction. William Reiser endeavors to explore the theology of spiritual direction and he names the experience of revelation as a primary presupposition of this ministry.  

If we never really meet and know God, our doctrines, rituals and practices are bound to remain lifeless. In short, attending to experience is central to the effectiveness of spiritual direction because enduring knowledge of God emerges ‘from below’, that is, from within the human world, from within human history, and from the ordinariness of everyday life.

While the complexity of the debate about the experience of God lies beyond the scope of this thesis, I will, however, engage with the modern western cultural context, which gives rise to interest in and concern about personal experience in relation to God. I will also explore concerns about the capacity of human experience to make foundational claims about God. Finally I will suggest categories for speaking about experiences of God as referring to awareness of the presence of God in human experience.

**Cultural context**

In the west, debate about experiencing God is, in part, a reaction to the turn to the subject initiated by the Enlightenment. The birth of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the dawn of the modern age changed the way people viewed the world. Characterised by the Cartesian focus on the human subject, the modern world moved away from an uncritical God-centred perspective, to a human-centred, modern worldview. Descartes, and those who

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12 Reiser, p. 4

followed, launched a quest for certainty founded on ‘Reason’. The Enlightenment project seeks to use reason alone to establish the veracity or otherwise of religious, moral and philosophical claims to truth.\(^\text{14}\)

For the most part, Christian theology has bowed to and embraced the demands of ‘Reason’. Theology engages in an apologetics defined and framed by its interlocutor, modern rationalism. In some parts of the church, however, theology has tried to reject modernity. Here, there is a tendency toward retaining a pre-modern image of God and a literalist, fundamentalist theology.\(^\text{15}\)

The modern pursuit of rational foundations for knowledge has developed in two directions: 1) through the empirical pursuit of certain indisputable data of the sensory evidence, and 2) through the pursuit of universal rational truths.\(^\text{16}\) The modern theological project has been characterised by attempts to justify itself in terms of these criteria.

The result has been devastating for theology. Hume pointed out that a statement about the existence of God is neither an empirical statement nor an analytical proposition. Kant used the tools of reason in an attempt to prove the existence of God. The result was a ‘turn to the human subject’ where God becomes a predicate of human experience and a universalism by which the experience of one human being is assumed to apply to all human beings. Progressions of Kantian logic resulted in: Feuerbach’s placement of the human subject as the beginning, centre and the end of religion; Freud’s argument that God is nothing more than a human projection; Marx’s argument that religion is a tool of oppression; and Nietzsche’s proclamation that God is dead.\(^\text{17}\)


\(^\text{15}\) The theology of many evangelical churches reflects this perspective, where there is a tendency to reject the influence of liberal theology and biblical critical method.


The pre-modern era was a time when people believed God to be at the centre of everything and community life unquestioningly revolved around the church. In contrast, the modern worldview has developed as one, which conceives of the world as a machine, as the sum of its consistent parts. The modern worldview creates a focus on the thinking self who uses the tools of reason to understand the world by taking things apart. Guided by this belief, philosophers have considered the nature of the human experience of God as something that requires analyses. There are two different even opposing arguments. One that all our experiences occur within a social-cultural context and therefore all experience is subjective. This emphasises the collective, what we share. Another argument emphasises the individual and our difference. This is a subjectivist, relativist position that there is something unique and essential in each person, which could lead to an objective interpretation of human experience.¹⁸ Are all accounts of experience necessarily subjective? Can an infinite God be experienced by finite beings? These questions have led theologians to focus on the scriptures and tradition as sources for reflection on the nature of God and to regard the human experience of God as problematic. O’Murchu observes the impact of such concerns on theology.

Under Newtonian science, the soul was removed from all aspects of nature. Interestingly, and ironically, God was not removed ... God became the supreme mathematician, the inventor of eternal laws, who either once, or continuously wound up the universal time clock so that it continued to function blindly and rigidly under a predetermined plan.¹⁹

The modern worldview focuses attention on the individual and calls on the use of reason to explain God. In modern western culture, the church is required to provide answers. One example of this is the way in which the protestant churches have developed statements of

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, University of Minneapolis Press, 1982, p. 72 - 88.
faith confessions. These called for the individual to believe in the foundational statements of the church’s confession.\textsuperscript{20}

Historian of philosophy Richard Tarnas observes that the current age is undergoing another paradigm shift. This shift in worldview is described as a movement from modernity to what is being called post-modernity. Tarnas observes that modernity’s quest for reason has failed. Reason cannot solve all the world’s problems, produce certainty, and lead us to world peace. Nor can it prove the existence of God.\textsuperscript{21}

O’Murchu parallels the emerging post-modern view with the shift in science from Newtonian to Quantum theory, typified by a growing awareness that the whole is in fact more significant than the sum of its parts.

Quantum theory claims that we perceive reality, not in isolated bits and pieces (particles, or parts of the whole), but in ‘quanta’ or what we might call ‘lumps of experience’. \textsuperscript{22}

O’Murchu calls the post-modern view a holistic paradigm. He describes this shift in awareness as having monumental consequences. Where Newtonian science viewed the universe as an unchanging machine, quantum theory describes a universe in constant flux. There is a shift from viewing systems as closed and self-contained, to seeing them as open and that nothing is complete in itself. There is also a shift from linear to lateral thinking from independent to interdependent interaction. Post-modernity challenges static systems, organisational structures, traditions and the idea of the subjective individual. O’Murchu describes a greater awareness of the inter-relatedness of all things and a growing culture of pluralism. \textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Tarnas, p. 389-394.
\textsuperscript{22} O’Murchu, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{23} O’Murchu, p. 21-25.
A consequence of post-modern thinking is the development of pluralism and a suspicion of institutions and organisations. People are reluctant to submit themselves to a confession of faith, organisational rules or institutional ways of operating. Church historian William Johnston calls this movement detraditionalisation. Johnston observes that in response to the detraditionalisation movement, the churches confessional period was followed by a period of deconfessionalism from 1900 to the early 1980’s. During this time the ecumenical movement developed, Vatican II opened up the Catholic Church, uniting churches formed and doctrinal lines of separation diminished. As a result many people retreated from confessional allegiances completely and left the church.

Johnston states that the move away from institutional churches has led to a ‘spirituality revolution’, which is part of the ongoing deconfessional movement. He calls it a ‘revolution’ because it is a grassroots movement that thrives on the exercising of personal choice and refuses to adhere to any tradition. In secular culture, there is a shift in focus from institutional belief to believers; from doctrine to experience; from ecclesial authority to individual discernment; from study of theology to interest in macro, or individual spirituality. This shift in popular culture has lead people away from traditional churches.

Johnston observes that from the early 1980’s the church has engaged in a reconfessional response to the deconfessionalism of popular culture. For example, some churches have returned to doctrinal faith statements and a focus on liturgical practice. From this has grown a tendency within the church for some people to be suspicious of personal spirituality and the notion of the individual’s experience of God.

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24 Johnston, p. 3.
25 Johnston, p. 3.
26 Johnston, p. 6.
27 Johnston, p. 6.
28 O’ Murchu, p. 25.
29 Johnston, p. 4.
In Johnston’s work, we observe some of the ways cultural context impacts on theology. Just as the modern worldview has shaped western theology, so has the post-modern view. As this brief account attests, the suspicion of the human experience of God occurs in a broad cultural context that explains why some schools of theology are suspicious of spiritual direction and its focus on individual discernment and experience.

**The problem with Foundationalism**

Roger Haight identifies two key problems for theology when exploring the human experience of God. Both of these relate to the desire for foundational and universal truths.

How can a particular and historically conditioned revelation be the vehicle of salvation for the whole human race? ...[And] when one assumes a historical perspective in viewing the human race, what one finds beyond the Christian sphere is not a lack of revelation, but a whole host of different revelations and their traditions.\(^{30}\)

Haight points out the impossibility of finding agreed and certain reports of sensory experience, an certain indisputable concepts. Ultimately, the tools of the Enlightenment have exposed an inability to establish religious certainty.\(^{31}\)

‘Foundations for knowledge can be described as universal and so undeniable principles of argumentation, or as a justifying belief itself not in need of justification.’ \(^{32}\) These beliefs have been called universals. Foundationalism ‘... holds that a discipline’s claim for rationality and truth must be based on some broadly accepted intellectual foundations, established by universal and certain reason.’ \(^{33}\) The empiricist and idealist philosophies ‘assumed that

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\(^{31}\) Gunton, p. 130.


\(^{33}\) Gunton, p. 132.
philosophy is largely an exercise in epistemology … [and] that the foundations of knowing ... are located in the human mind …" 34

The notion that the human mind is capable of locating and holding universal and foundational beliefs was called into question by John Dewey and William James, and the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism.35 In response, the paradigm of practical contextuality has emerged. This philosophy argues that no experience, belief or claim is free from a cultural, social and linguistic context. Nothing is free from interpretation and therefore, referring to the above definition of foundationalism, there is no belief that requires no justification. To reject foundationalism is to argue that there are only concrete particular manifestations, including the foundationalist project itself.

A nonfoundationalist philosophical movement has developed which has prompted the collapse of the Cartesian epistemological approach.36 Non-foundationalism argues that ‘knowledge and understanding do not rest on principles immediately experienced or certainly demonstrated, nor do they appear as universal truths.’ 37 A task of theology is to determine whether foundations and universals are accessible to human inquiry. Simply put, the modern worldview says that universals are accessible, and the post-modern worldview says they are not.

Francis Schussler Fiorenza’s description of the hermeneutical project supports the non-foundationalist argument. Schussler Fiorenza describes the way in which the hermeneutical circle has been corrected and modified by the modern and post-modern paradigms.38 As discussed, classical hermeneutics was a process of moving from the whole to the particular and back to the whole again. Next came an awareness of human subjectivity and an interest

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34 Thiel, p. 2.
36 Thiel, p. 12.
37 Thiel, p. 76.
in the mind, world and experience of the author. Following this was a shift to awareness of the subjectivity of the reader. The human interpretive project is caught within subjectivity. As a result, a correlational theology has developed which seeks to find correlation between religious experience and the religious tradition. 39

George Lindbeck describes correlational theology and the search for existential experience of transcendence, which seeks universal principles based on human experience, as ‘experiential-expressivism’. He suggests that this approach is characterised by five general assumptions:

1) There is a common core experience that is expressed in different ways in different religions.
2) The experience may be conscious or unconscious.
3) This experience is common to all human beings.
4) The core common experience is a reference point.
5) The primordial religious experience is characterised as ‘God’s gift of love’. 40

Lindbeck names Ignatius Loyola, Paul Tillich, Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner as developing theology founded in experiential-expressivism. This approach assumes that study of religious phenomena supports the unity of religious experience. Lindbeck and the non-foundationalist approach argue that there is no evidence to support this claim. 41 Richard Neibuhr also expresses concern about the focus on experience resulting in an anthropological starting point, which can make the human experience the object of revelation, whereas God should be the object. 42

Lindbeck draws on Wittgenstein’s argument that language forms culture rather than culture forms language. Lindbeck suggests that a religion has its own communal phenomenon,
language, logic, grammar and vocabulary, which shape individual experience, rather than the experience of individuals forming the religion.

[A religion] is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these may be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. 43

The formative language or idiom of the Christian faith is the Christian scriptures. It is the Christian ‘text’ that provides theology with a means of articulating faith and identity. Lindbeck proposes an ‘intra-textural theology’, which is about describing ‘… reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating the scriptures into extra scriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.’ 44 Instead of seeking foundational principles and trying to prove Christianity to potential adherents, Lindbeck suggests teaching the language and practice of the religion. Rather than appealing to ‘extra textural’ sources (i.e. outside Christianity) as justification of Christian truth, Lindbeck’s approach is to appeal to ‘intra-textural’ sources (within Christianity) to find truth. 45

The nonfoundationalist, intra-textural approach to theology provides a theological framework which states that foundations and universals are not accessible or necessary. Instead, the Christian faith can be understood as a web of belief with its own cultural and linguistic system of ritual, narrative, liturgy and doctrine that informs the interpretation of experience. Lindbeck rejects ‘any efforts to uncover universal principle or structures [as] ... misguided’. 46

43 Lindbeck, p. 33.
46 Jeanrond, p. 75.
This approach argues that all principles of faith, theological dogmas and human experiences are limited by historically conditioned human interpretation. It is assumed here that foundations and universals are not determinative for theology.

In accord with this nonfoundational intra-textural approach, I argue that the foundationalist approach is problematic to human inquiry. Human inquiry has never found a foundation that does not require interpretation. This does not mean, however, that human experience is not an important source of theological reflection. Indeed, this discussion highlights the importance of developing skills in the interpretation of human experience in the context of the web of belief or idiom of the Christian faith.

Reiser discusses the role of experience in the spiritual direction conversation. His statement about the importance of the integration of experience in the formation of Christian life appears to link with Lindbeck’s categories for a nonfoundational intra-textural approach.

Although the word ‘experience’ sounds straightforward and concrete, it is actually a lot more complex than first appears. In order to avoid reducing experience to meaning raw sense data, it is important for us to understand that experience is necessarily connected to the mind’s activity of interpreting what comes to us through sense and memory. Experience, furthermore, is never very far from the activity of our imaginations … while doctrine and creed play a vital role in the life of faith, unless we make our own the truths that we profess, our faith will remain detached from our hearts. Doctrines – truths we profess – arise from the Christian community’s encounter with the mystery of God. And that encounter mediated through the Christian story, liturgical celebration, and ascetical and moral practices, is repeatable across generations.

47 Schussler Fiorenza, p. 123.
48 Reiser, p. 3-4.
Human experience, therefore, should not be discounted as a source for theological inquiry. If religion is a communal phenomenon of language, logic, grammar and vocabulary that shapes individual experience, then reflection on human experience is vital. The linguistic system of a religion does not operate prior to or in isolation from human experience. Human experience interacts with and is formed by the cultural linguistic systems in which human beings function. The linguistic system is also formed, refined and developed by human experience.

Lindbeck acknowledges that his approach is primarily theoretical and not tested in the context of human community. When applied to the context of the church, Lindbeck’s work invites consideration of how human beings are formed by participation in the liturgy and narrative of the Christian web of belief; and, how the Christian story inform and shape our personal and communal story. These questions cannot be addressed without reference to the human experience of God.

The very language of the Christian faith tells of God who reveals God’s self to human beings. The Hebrew scriptures tell the stories of many human experiences of encounter with the divine. The New Testament tells of God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ. God lives as a human being immersed in historical context and in human experience. The gospel writers record stories of people’s experience of God in Jesus. Through his death and resurrection and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, humanity is drawn into the redemptive life of God. The Christ event is not an isolated historical moment, but an on going, in breaking of God into human experience. God is revealed in human experience, therefore human experience must be part of theological enquiry.

Spiritual direction provides a forum for people to reflect on, welcome and integrate the work of the Holy Spirit forming them in the image of God. If God continues to break into human experience and form us as followers of Christ, then spiritual direction attends to discernment of the movements of God’s Spirit. Discernment, as described in chapter four, does the work called for by nonfoundational intra-textural theology. Discernment also provides a forum to
reflect on and integrate the cultural and linguistic system of ritual, narrative, liturgy and doctrine as it informs the interpretation of experience and informs human living.

Kathleen Fischer provides a helpful example of the way in which language is linked with theology and experience when she writes about a feminist perspective on spiritual direction. She draws attention to the interaction between experience and language. As feminist theologians reclaim the contribution of women's experience to the theological dialogue, Fischer reminds us that language and experience are interrelated. Language can control and limit experience. If, for example, our language for God is limited to the masculine images of Father, King and Lord, this can limit and diminish equally significant maternal experiences of God. There can be no doubt that the patriarchal language of modern western culture has impacted on theology.

Because of the reciprocal relationship between language and experience, religious experience is not only conditioned by, but also shapes, our language for the divine.

Fischer offers an important insight into the reclaiming of the feminine. She begins with a call to contemplation. Women's prayerful listening to their own encounter with God’s grace can provide a source of enriched language for God.

Contemplative prayer is a way of discovering God, ourselves, and other persons. Continual encounters with God in prayer have power to transform our established images of the divine, whatever they may be ... through contemplation we prepare for the disclosures of the divine.

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50 Fischer, p. 55.
51 Fischer, p. 56.
Fischer’s call to contemplative prayer and the suggestion that prayer can be transformative in the human experience sounds helpful, but her talk about encounters with God cannot be considered without reference to the concerns discussed above. The final words in the above quote from Fisher lay out a path through these dilemmas. Fisher speaks of contemplation preparing us for the ‘disclosures of the divine’. This statement points to God disclosing or revealing God self to humanity and, through contemplative prayer, humanity developing an attentiveness to God’s self disclosure.

The Christian narrative describes a God whose very nature is a self-disclosing community. God seeks to become known to human beings in Christ and draws us into relationship in the life of the Holy Trinity. Contemplative prayer begins with God in Christ seeking intimate involvement in our living. The desire in God for us stirs in us a desire for God and our hearts long for God. Prayer leads into relationship with the life beyond our individuality and shapes the person we are becoming. This leads us towards communion with God and an emerging self-knowledge. Prayer is an invitation into deeper freedom to follow the Gospel more generously. In this sense, our prayer leads into experiential participation in the narrative of our faith. Spiritual direction is a prayerful contemplative conversation in which we listen for the divine self-disclosure in human experience and experience the gift of grace. By grace, prayer is not a solitary act. The praying person becomes a blessing to others. Spiritual direction supports people as they grow in loving friendship with Christ and are graced to become involved in Christ’s mission in the world.

**Speaking about Experience**

Consistent with Lindbeck and the nonfoundationalist intra-textual approach, the human experience of God can be described as a disclosure of the divine. As the Christian scriptures attest, God by nature is self-revealing and self-concealing. The language or idiom of the Christian text, illustrates many ways the divine is disclosed to humanity. The Christian scriptures tell the narrative of a God who created humanity in God’s triune image and who seeks covenantal, loving, gracious relationship with humanity. The scriptures also attest that
God cannot be contained by human understanding and at times remains concealed. Living the Christian narrative, we are formed in a faith committed to God’s self-concealing mystery and self-revealing love that ‘reaches out and engages human existence for its salvation.’ The narrative of God’s love as will and desire for human salvation, logically suggests some form of translation and effectiveness in human existence. As God reaches out in grace to humanity, human beings may become aware of God’s self-revelation.

Haight describes the Holy Spirit as the invisible presence, energy and creative power of God that is given into creation at Pentecost. He uses the phrase ‘God’s Presence’ to represent God as Spirit, grace and love, which is a personal presence in human experience.

God’s Presence is precisely the presence of God’s own self, which actively summons human freedom out of itself in a self-transcending movement toward God.53

People’s claims about experiencing God can be described as the conscious response on the part of human beings to God’s presence. Experience is a medium through which we may encounter God54 and become formed by participation in the Christian narrative. As we become aware of God’s presence, we can experience God’s self-communication, thus we experience grace.55 The experience of God’s grace does not yield positive knowledge of God or foundational statements about God, instead grace yields awareness, however dim, of the presence of God. In turn, the experience of becoming aware of the presence of God invites interpretation and calls for discernment as people seek to describe encountering divine mystery.

52 Haight, 1990, p. 58.
55 As defined in the introduction and will be explored in depth in chapter 2.
Haight acknowledges that God’s grace is universally accessible. He argues that the universal structure is not human reason, as suggested by Enlightenment theories and rejected by linguistic philosophy. The universal structure begins within the narrative of God’s gracious self-revelation and follows in the openness of human freedom and to the transcendent.

Haight also claims that grace is a subjective phenomenon which is always historically mediated. Human consciousness is bound to the embodied physical world of the senses and all human action is grounded in historical context. Human reason is also historically conditioned and will not be capable of uncovering the shape of transcendent reality. Instead of relying on reason and dismissing the possibility of human beings encountering God, a theology of grace implies God can and does reveal that God’s self to humanity. Grace is, however, mediated through historical forms and context.

The only way God deals with human beings is through finite media of the world and the contingencies of history. All that exists in history is … specific and particular revelations. Revelation [of grace] is a common human phenomenon, but it can only be received in particular, concrete, specific, finite, and relative historical forms.  

Foundational theological claims need not be drawn from the concrete, historically specific moments of grace. Theological assertions and the experience of grace itself are different yet inseparable. The concern that focus on human experience can reduce theology to anthropology is addressed when human experience of God is understood as encounter with grace. A graced encounter with the self-revealing God of the Christian narrative can only begin with God’s action. As God acts and human beings respond and reflect on their encounter with grace, profound theological awareness can develop.

If Christian ministers could ever step back and listen to what goes on all over the world as women and men engage in spiritual direction, the resulting insight would, I suspect, take their collective theological breath away … for in the

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56 Haight, 1990, p. 64.
process of direction, the core beliefs about the divine mystery itself are shown to be confirmed or disconfirmed: that God is good, that God is personal, that God is love, or that God is compassionate. Whenever assertions such as these come alive – that is, whenever they start to inform and shape everyday human existence – then they can properly be called truths and not merely theologically correct propositions.  

Focus on human experience of grace is indeed a tool in theological discourse. Spiritual direction provides a discerning environment in which to explore experience and strengthen insights.

**Experience with God**

Kevin Hart suggests ‘… we can talk of experience *with* God but not strictly speaking *of* God.’ An experience with God is an encounter or a lived event. Although there are many accounts of people claiming to have experienced God, the finite human being cannot experience the infinite. It is, however, more accurate to describe the Christian narrative forming us in relationship with an infinite being whose very nature is to seek to encounter the finite through human consciousness. It only makes sense to speak of experience with God, ‘because the infinite has dialectically preceded the finite.’

This description of experience with God as encounter or as lived experience shifts focus from the human subject encountering a divine object, toward awareness of God as subject acting in relationship with humanity. Paul Tillich offers a passionate call not to start with objectifying God, but to start with the ultimate concern of human beings: the personal desire for the divine.

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57 Reiser, p. 7 - 8.
58 Hart & Wall, p. 9.
59 Hart & Wall, p. 74.
Let’s not start with the question of God, for people of our objectified world take God as an object whose existence or non-existence is debated like that of another galaxy. This denies the divinity of the divine. Let us start instead with what we have, what we really are – our ultimate concern, which is implied in everything positive and negative in our life. Let us start here … our most personal experience … Thus the vertical line of the divine enters the horizontal dynamics of human history.  

We are reminded that God is the subject not the object of grace. God’s self revelation and the human experience of God revealing God’s self can be described in terms of inter-personal relationship.

Haight provides five very useful characteristics of Christian revelation. First, revelation is ‘intersubjective communication’. God is experienced as a subject not an object of the experience. ‘God is experienced as a personal self … present to and within one’s self’. 

Second, in Christian revelation God is experienced as transcendent. ‘One is not experiencing the self, but a Presence to the self that infinitely transcends one’s own subjectivity.’ God transcends every element of human existence and cannot be contained as an object. Third, the experience of God comes from outside the human subject, outside the self. Fourth, the revelatory experience leaves an impression on the consciousness, which can be difficult to distinguish from the active interpretation of that impression. All conscious experience involves both the impact and interpretation of that impact. ‘There can be no pure experience that is not already interpreting experience, and no passive reception of experience that does not also involve active response and bestowing of meaning on that experience’. Fifth, while revelation may begin with a first expression, the ongoing reflection on revelation in the community of faith moves beyond spontaneous impression to include a history of

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61 Haight, 1990, p. 73.
62 Haight, 1990, p. 73.
64 Haight, 1990, p. 76.
interpretation. To these five categories, Thomas Hart adds another: encounter with God will reorient the soul, and as a result the soul will begin to take bearings from this new awareness.

These characteristics respond to concerns raised at the beginning of this chapter about the human experience of God. They provided a clear sense that revelation begins with God. They also serve as tools in discernment when considering if specific experiences are indeed moments of awareness of God’s grace. Developing awareness of God’s grace will display the characteristics Haight and Hart describe. Moments of grace will be described as inter-subjective communication with the transcendent Other. The experience will come from outside the person as an impression, which invites interpretation in continuity with the history of Christian interpretation. The moment will also have some impact on reorientation of the soul as a response to awareness of encountering God’s grace.

God as God revealed to human experience through Jesus, is personal. And one can describe the experience of this revelation by using analogously a framework of inter-subjective or interpersonal communication. This is not a deductive move that argues on the basis of the personality of God but rather a phenomenology of the experience of Christian revelation that is responsible for the belief that God is personal. Christian revelation does not appear as knowledge about God as about an object, not even as knowledge about a transcendent person. Rather Christian revelation takes the form of a personal encounter with a divine subject.

This description of encounter with the divine subject echoes Tillich’s description of the vertical line of the divine entering the horizontal dynamics of history as encounter between two subjects. The human experience with God, therefore, invites human beings to grow in attentiveness to revelations of God’s grace.

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65 Haight, 1990, p. 77.
67 Haight, 1990, p. 73.
Attending to God

This thesis seeks not to make a claim about experiencing God, but about an awareness of God’s presence and an experience of grace. In order to claim that an embodied experience may be an experience of grace requires attempting to find a theological framework for referring to experience. The Christian narrative begins with the divine subject revealing God’s self in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In response to God’s self-revelation, the ultimate concern of human experience is to seek the divine. Human beings respond to God in faith. Faith is not initiated by seeking an experience of God, but by seeking God revealed in Jesus Christ and attending to God in prayer.

Awareness of God’s presence leads to an openness in human beings and communities to the activity of God’s grace. Attending to God invites concentration on God, relaxing and drawing close to God, waiting on God, accompanying God and offering service to God. The Latin attendere is ‘to stretch’, which suggests attending to God also involves some sacrifice and stretching of the self. The Spirit … draws us gradually, almost imperceptibly into a deeper life with God and one another, as in the parable of the wheat that grows slowly, quietly, surely. Yet neither is it by any means uncharacteristic of the Spirit to shape and even turn upside down the intuitions upon which we have built our lives. The same Spirit that descends upon our hearts with the graceful movement of a dove can drive us into life’s sultry wastelands where no one gets out without being tested and scarred.

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68 Hart & Wall, p. 80.
69 Reiser, p. 17 – 18.
Spiritual direction provided intentional space to attend to God in prayer. God is met as absolute subject, whom we cannot control or conjure. We listen for God who comes to us not as an experience, but in our experience. God comes as revealed in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the mystery of Christ living with us. Denis Edwards proposes:

> Experience of grace ... is the experience of something which transcends us, which breaks in upon our day to day existence in a mysterious way, and which we experience as a gift given to us.  

When we attend to God in prayer, any event could be seen as opening to the mystery of Christ. A mother embracing and being embraced by her baby could be considered nothing more than a physical act. Or, the event itself could be observed with an awareness of divine presence as touched by mystery. Mother and child embracing across the vast ground of Christ’s suffering and love, their very beings constituted as ‘being with’ and ‘attending to’ divine presence, divine grace. In that small embrace, the embrace of grace wraps around them both, bringing healing and transformation.

> [Encounter with God] is awe and rupture; because it involves encountering the Other, it contains the possibility of peril; and it is the realization that our homes and familial and intellectual, have no ground on which to stand. It occurs without theatre more often than not, in and around and through ordinary events … We could testify to it, were our mouths not caked with silence because of it: how can one make sentences out of that which upsets our entire way of thinking and being?

This statement captures the awesome impact of attending to divine presence in the ordinary moments that often occur ‘without theatre’. Hart describes the way in which encounter with God can evoke a sense of awe and rapture, challenge and joy. Such encounter is dangerous and shifts the way we view the world to such an extent that the ground upon which we are

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71 Hart & Wall, p. 86.
comfortably standing can shift completely. While experience of grace can occur in the ordinary, awareness of grace transforms experience beyond comfortable words, culture or language. God transcends all human constructs. Exploring the possibility that human beings can experience grace is not to be entered into lightly, but with reverence for we are exploring Holy Ground.
Chapter 2
GRACE

Introduction

The process of seeking a framework for discussion about the human experience of God in the previous chapter pointed to God’s grace. Human beings cannot experience God, but can and do encounter the action and outworking of God's self-communication, God’s grace. In order to expand and explore the notion of grace, what follows is a reflection on the linguistic roots of the word grace, its use in the Christian scriptures and a brief reflection on developments in the theological concept of grace. Having developed a fuller understanding of grace, attention will then turn to exploring the way in which human beings can have embodied encounters with God’s grace.

Grace is a key word in the Christian faith, but its exact meaning is difficult to define. In contemporary language, people speak of God’s grace in many different ways. The blessing before a meal is called ‘grace’. God’s grace is attributed to the avoiding of disaster in the statement: ‘There but by the grace of God go I’. Grace is evoked in the liturgy as a form of blessing, ‘grace and peace to you’, and as a description of God, ‘loving and gracious God’. In these contemporary examples grace is variously used to describe a prayer of thanks before a meal, God’s power, a blessing and an attribute of God. Hence grace is an important word in the Christian vocabulary with many different meanings and functions. One characteristic common to all theological understandings of grace is that ‘grace is not due to any right on the part of human beings and God is wholly free in bestowing it.’

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74 Haight, 1979, p. 7.
**Grace in the Scriptures**

When considering the meaning of the word *grace*, the Hebrew scriptures provide an important interpretive framework for the New Testament and Christian tradition. The Hebrew word *hanan*, a verb, means to be gracious, and *hen*, a noun, means to have mercy on someone. *Hanans* is used in the context of the relationship between people and also that between God and humanity. This latter relationship entails a sense of duty of reciprocity, as exemplified in the covenantal relationship described in Exodus 20: 6. In addition, Deuteronomy 7: 12 and Hosea 6: 4 focus on the sovereignty of God in relationship with humanity.\(^75\)

Other Hebrew words for grace, *hessed* and *emet*, are often grouped together to describe God’s grace. *Hessed* means people finding favour in another’s eyes,\(^76\) and *emet* is translated as reliability and faithfulness. In this sense, *hessed* and *emet* are rooted in human interaction and evoke a sense of community. These words are not commonly used as theological terms, but taken together the phrase *hessed we’ emet* refers to God’s graciousness, rock-like dependability,\(^77\) and the favour which people find in God's sight.\(^78\)

From this reflection on the Hebrew, a dual sense of the meaning of grace emerges. Grace refers to both the reciprocal relationship of loyalty typified in the covenant between God and humanity and the attribute of God’s dependability and the favour God bestows on people. Thus, grace is experienced both as God’s attitude and God’s activity.

The writers of Christian scriptures used Hebrew words and concepts and translated them into Greek. The Hebrew *hesed* and *hanan* have been translated into the Greek words *eleos* and *charis*. *Hesed*, with its sense of God’s bestowing of favour, has usually been translated into

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\(^{77}\) Duffy, 1993, p. 21.

\(^{78}\) Berger, Auer and Rahner, p. 410.
Greek as *eleos*, and in English as *mercy*. *Hanan*, with its reciprocal sense of being gracious and having mercy on someone in covenantal relationship is translated as *charis*, which has become the Latin *gratia* and the English word *grace*.

The root of *charis* is *char*, which denotes finding pleasure in some one or some thing. In the scriptures *Charis* is used in three ways. First, to describe that which shines, that is attractive, charms, is elegant and that which brings joy. Second, to speak of finding affection or favour. And third, to evoke gratitude in response to a gracious giver.  

Of the synoptic gospels, only Luke uses *charis* and *eleos*. Luke (Lk.1: 3 & 2: 52) uses *charis* to describe the ‘heavenly reward’ or ‘salvation yet to come’, thereby maintaining the Hebrew usage. Luke, however, claims that this salvation is wrought by God though Jesus. Salvation calls people to believe in Jesus (Acts 4: 33). ‘Here *charis* functions as a force given by God…’

Paul reflects at length on *charis*, and describes a reality he calls grace. The gift of grace for Paul is a distinctive element of the Christian community, where grace is both the salvation offered by God in Christ, and the thanks offered by people in response. Putting these two elements together, Paul proclaims that grace is the experience of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Biblical scholars observe the development of the way Paul uses the term grace throughout his letters. His sense of God’s grace expands as he writes and seeks to describe his experience of God in the risen Christ. Paul uses grace to describe his apostolic calling ‘through grace’ (Gal.1: 15) and his giftedness for service, ‘the grace given to me’ (1 Cor. 3: 10). He also describes the example of Jesus’ self-giving love as a grace. Grace is used to describe God’s justifying action (Rom. 3: 24) and, in Romans 4: 16, Paul links grace to faith.

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80 Berger, Auer, & Rahner, p. 410 - 411.
81 Berger, Auer, & Rahner, p. 410.
82 Duffy, 1993, p. 32.
Paul also uses the word grace in its Hebrew sense of *hen* as the consciousness of God’s favour in almost every greeting and blessing in his letters. *Charis* is used as a slogan when Paul transforms the traditional Jewish blessing, ‘mercy and peace be with you’, into ‘grace and peace be with you’.  

Paul disagrees with the Jewish notion that the gift of God’s grace is bound with adherence to the Law. He claims that Jesus embodies God’s sovereign and gracious design and the peace that comes through relationship with God is a gift of grace. Paul says ‘… since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to his grace in which we stand; and boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God’ (Rom. 5:1-2). Paul is describing a sense of ‘standing in grace’ that simply comes with faith as a gift.

Paul also gives attention to the way in which God’s grace is manifest in the Christian community (1 Cor. 1: 3-7). He describes grace as incarnate, or embodied, in charismas. Grace becomes effective in the lives of human beings and inspires gifts in people in the form *charismata*: grace gifts. ‘We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us …’ (Rom. 12: 6). These gifts of grace are not for the benefit of individuals, but for the building up of the community of the body of Christ, the redeemed humanity (Rom. 12: 3ff). In this sense, Paul is referring to grace as a redeeming force for all humanity.

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84 Berger, Auer and Rahner, p. 411.
Theology of Grace

This reflection on the ways grace is employed in Christian scriptures illustrates that grace is multi-faceted. Developing the Hebrew sense of grace in God’s attitude of love and favour and God’s activity in covenantal relationship with humanity, the Christian scriptures proclaim that God’s grace is revealed in Jesus Christ. In Christianity, grace is experienced as blessing, giftedness and abiding relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

A theology of grace must be developed in the context of a Christian eschatology that views the current condition of humanity as not corresponding to God’s purposes and intent for creation. Human beings, not God, are responsible for this discontinuity, and God in Jesus initiates the end-time vision of a restored order in creation. In Christ, and by the gift of grace, God’s end time vision and promise of the basilea, reign of God, becomes a present reality. In Christ the wholeness and healing of creation breaks into our time and so it is that we affirm with Paul that ‘by grace we are saved’ (Eph. 2: 5 & 8).

A theology of grace is also entwined with the human being’s self understanding in relation to God and creation. Thus, questions about free choice, human responsibility, redemption, forgiveness of sin and healing all impact on a theology of grace. For example, the second creation story seeks to address many of these issues (Gen. 2 & 3). The story describes humanity’s fall from the graced environment of the garden and the shift in our relationship with God. A narrative framework is established for human beings having their origin in harmonious relationship with God in the divine garden. By their own doing, people have broken this relationship by trying to become like God and eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Perhaps the knowledge provided by eating the fruit of the tree is more than simply intellectual. It could also be the knowledge of experience.

85 Duffy, 1993, p. 43.
86 Duffy, 1993, p. 45.
The stories of the descendants of Adam and Eve tell of humanity’s struggle to find redemption in the life of God, and God’s desire to maintain a relationship with humanity and restore God’s vision for creation. The Christian faith proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, the new Adam, who will bring about the end-time vision of basileia. Through God’s hesed and hanan, the Hebrew scriptures describe God drawing humanity back into relationship. In Jesus, God’s reign becomes a present-yet-still-coming reality and humanity is called forward, through grace, into a shared life in God.

Corresponding to the pivotal Jewish concepts hesed and hanan, grace in the Christian scriptures signifies the free, benevolent and merciful love of God for people. Never purely internal, this benevolence reveals itself in a history of redemption and liberation. Grace is a new life and a new way given by God in Jesus Christ and made accessible in history ... It is a mode of existence in which God’s merciful love and loyalty (hesed and emet) are incarnated by people in their earthly existence. 87

In the early church, Greek and gnostic philosophical as well as anthropological frames of reference impacted on the Christian theology of grace. The Greek dualistic views separated reality into divine and earthly, good and evil, flesh and spirit. Such views place Christ as the mediator who brings knowledge and enlightenment between the heavenly and earthly. From these ideas the concept of original sin developed. Tertullian (160-225) suggested that the sin of Adam is passed on through the male seed to infect every new life. 88 Others argued that the human will is the source of sin. Such debates led to a sense of the distance between God and humanity and a theology of grace shifted from being about religious experience to being about gaining release from sin.

In the 4th and 5th centuries Augustine of Hippo (354-430) developed an extensive theology of grace. In response to Pelagianism, which understood sin and grace as external to human beings, Augustine understood grace as present in humanity. Augustine argued that grace is

87 Duffy, 1993, p. 27.
the outcome of God’s love and the foundation of human virtues. In this sense, grace not only teaches how to live, but also enables people to live by virtues though the indwelling Spirit.

Scolastic theology raised concerns about the discernment of true and false virtues. Thinkers like Thomas Aquinus and Duns Scotus argued that action follows from being. They began to think of grace as the principle, ontological quality of the soul, which generates virtue. A distinction was made between ‘created grace’ and ‘uncreated grace’. Created grace is that which God created in humanity and is part of the nature of being human. Uncreated grace is that which is of God and can manifest as the divine dwelling in the human person.

Much has been written about the metaphysical dimensions of grace. A full exploration of these concepts is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is helpful, however, to be aware of the debates about created and uncreated grace, the natural and supernatural, freedom and grace, habitual grace and actual grace.

During the middle ages, although Augustine’s stress on grace as gift of God’s love and source of human virtue was affirmed, there was keen interest in the role of the human person in the process of salvation. The notion of people being able to earn merit by doing good works became popular. Ideas developed about being able to earn grace. Popular teachings encouraged people to earn grace and salvation through penitential disciplines, adhering to moral law, offering money for Masses and even joining crusades.

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89 Duffy, 1993, p. 100.
80 Augustinian theology of grace included extensive discussion on freedom and free will. If grace enables people to live by virtue, this raises question about human freedom to choose between good and bad. Augustine’s focus is on freedom of being which he says leads to freedom in doing. Being in the love and grace of God calls forth a freedom, which chooses spontaneously to do that which is good. Duffy, 1993, p. 100 ff.
The Protestant reformers called for a return to Paul’s teaching in Roman 3, that we are ‘justified by faith apart from works of law’. Martin Luther (1483-1546) reclaimed the Augustinian teaching that it is with the aid of grace that human beings accomplish meritorious actions, good works, fulfill the law and avoid sin. But he was also interested in the concept of human free will. As his ideas developed, Luther stressed ‘faith alone’ as the path to life in God. Luther claimed grace as the basic benevolent and merciful attitude of God. He proposed that without grace human beings ‘will only one’s own good’. In this he reverses popular perceptions. Instead of assuming that human nature is to generally will what is good, Luther proposed that without grace human being’s natural powers orient toward sin. He characterises sin as self-centeredness and rebellion from God. In this way, Luther argued that salvation comes through receiving Christ’s righteousness through faith.

… [M]an recognises his own damnation and despairs of saving himself by his own power, for otherwise he is left cold by the mere thought that he has fallen in Adam, for he hopes that he can raise himself up from that fall by his own free will, indeed he is presumptuous about this. But here [in Rom. 3: 19] he learns that grace has raised him up before every will, including his own.

The Protestant Reform Movement gained momentum as theologians like Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564) continued to develop theologies of justification. Calvin emphasized the extrinsic righteousness of Christ as the source of righteousness for humanity. He argued that by faith people are ‘grafted into Christ’, and when ‘incorporated into Christ’ people are justified. Hence, justification is the result of Christ, not faith. Faith is the means by which people are incorporated into the life and justification of Christ. This justification in Christ leads to awareness of the gifts of God

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which Calvin calls the twofold grace of Christ, ‘consisting of repentance and justification’. 98

Nineteenth century theologians such as Hegel claimed that grace reflected the inner-life of the Triune God. This represented a shift from a focus on grace as a gift from God, to an awareness that God comes to dwell in humanity. 99 Instead of needing God on the outside giving grace in order to transform sinners, there is awareness that God also dwells with humanity and it is God’s gracious presence that is transformative. It is the uncreated grace or divine nature, incarnate and present with humanity that creates grace in human beings.

The 20th Century saw ongoing reflections on the theology of grace. Debate about nature and grace continued to be played out in Catholic and Protestant theological traditions. Generally speaking, the Catholic tradition holds that grace is part of nature. Henri de Lubac drew attention to grace as a free gift and states that grace is the object of a deeply rooted human desire. Karl Rahner discusses this human desire for grace as part of the ontological nature of humanity, which he calls the ‘supernatural existential’. 100

Luther’s proposal that nature needs grace for salvation remains evident in the Protestant tradition. For example, Paul Tillich (1886-1965) said that sin is not a single immoral act but a universal state of separation. Grace then is not a virtue or state of perfection, but a state of reunion with that from which humanity has become separated.

[Grace] is a principle or a reality in life itself which breaks through in moments of self-disgust and self-condemnation and which can affirm that one is accepted, although one knows how unacceptable one is … So we look for grace from above, which is not a divine emergency action which sometimes breaks into our predicament, but is the actual paradox in which we live. It is always present and sometimes, when

we are open because of our self-disgust, it may grasp us and give us the experience of a new life or new being. 101

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s experience living in Nazi Germany made him profoundly aware of the cost of being a Christian disciple. This is reflected in his writings about cheap and costly grace. He echoes Tillich’s sense that grace is not a divine emergency action, and provides a passionate call not to make grace into something that is cheap and only requires intellectual assent to the concept of God in order for it to be received.

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before … cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. 102

Bonhoeffer argues that when Luther proclaimed that we are saved by grace, Luther was not saying that grace is given without cost. Luther’s experience of grace was that with grace and salvation comes costly discipleship. Costly grace is like the pearl of great price (Matt. 13: 46), which is worth selling everything in order to attain. Bonhoeffer proclaims that grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ who gave his life in order to stand in the truth.

Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light. 103

103 Bonhoeffer, p. 55.
Leonardo Boff is also aware of the cost of discipleship, which he explores in his writing on liberation theology. Boff shifts the discussion from grace being understood as a concept, to it being experienced as an encounter between God and humanity.\textsuperscript{104} Boff points out the difficulties that arise when too great an emphasis is placed on God’s uncreated grace, on human sinfulness or on the need for created grace as a means of justification.\textsuperscript{105}

\begin{quote}
[Grace] signifies the presence of God in the world and in human beings …[and] also signifies the openness of human beings to God. Grace is always an encounter between God who gives himself and a human being who does likewise. \textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

Boff reminds us that ‘before grace is spoken about … an experience is lived through’. \textsuperscript{107} He describes grace as a ‘mode of being’, which results from encounter with God. The starting point for Boff, as it is for Paul and the many theologians who have followed him, is a desire to reflect on the human experience of grace. Boff begins with the conviction that we live in grace. There is a need to not only think about the idea and concept of grace, but also to reflect on the experience of grace that is taking place in our world and time. This thesis does just that. Discussion about concepts and ideas about grace are linked with reflection on the experience of grace taking place in specific moments of \textit{maternal embrace}.

\section*{Characteristics of Grace}

Reflection on the linguistic development of the word grace, its use in the Christian scriptures and a brief account of shifts in theological thinking about grace, highlights awareness of some key qualities and characteristics of grace. This chapter has posited God as the source of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{104} Boff, p. 5. \\
\textsuperscript{105} This discussion leads to questions about what is nature and what is the distinction between nature and grace. There are also questions raised about the ontological nature of being human. These areas of reflection require a more thorough discussion than is possible here. \\
\textsuperscript{106} Boff, p. 3. \\
\textsuperscript{107} Boff, p. 35. 
\end{flushright}
grace and grace is the gift of God’s very self. Grace is initiated by God, not people, and is given freely. Grace is given in the love of God, not earned through human merit. Grace can lead people toward: participation in the mystery of God; lives which celebrate the love of God; a transformation towards acting lovingly; an enhanced sense of wholeness or connectedness within self and creation; and confidence and hope in the eschatological promises of God. Grace is corporate and functions to connect people with one another and with the life of the Trinity. In this way grace transforms human experience of sin, evil, egoism and lack of love. This outworking of grace is described by words like ‘salvation’, ‘redemption’ and ‘justification’. Nothing is excluded from grace and every reality has the potential to be touched by grace. 108

This summary of characteristics of grace sits alongside some problematic conceptions of grace. Dreyer highlights some areas of concern that have developed over the course of Christian history. Thinking grace is a measurable almost physical thing that can be quantified or measured, can lead to problematic ideas about good deeds leading to grace and grace being collectable. This can also lead to a separation of nature and grace as disconnected entities. Separating nature and grace in an absolute way and focusing on the transcendent nature of God can lead to human experience being diminished and human dignity, responsibility and confidence being minimised. In a similar way, an over-emphasis on sin can suggest God only relates to people as a result of our sinfulness and is found as a result of our failure, sorrow or weakness. This diminishes awareness that God is also found in strength, joy and success. A legalistic view of grace can emerge which places boundaries around God’s favour. Exclusive discussion of grace as a concept or thing removed from human living can lead to disconnection with the experience of grace and its presence in the world. Dialogue about grace should not be about an abstract concept, but about persons endowed with grace. On the other hand, grace is not a private matter for the enrichment of the individual soul. A focus on

the interior aspects of grace to the exclusion of external effects is of concern because the experience of grace begins in the life of a given community. 109

Roger Haight reminds us that grace refers to God's gift of love freely given, unmerited and undeserved, to humanity. 110 With this in mind, we return to the definition of grace offered in the introduction: grace is God's self-communication. Grace is how God deals with people concretely in this world; how God's love manifests itself in the life of human beings and affects human history. In this way, grace impacts on human lives and become part of human experience.

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109 Dreyer, p. 22 - 38.
Chapter 3

THE EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

Present Tense

Your holy hearsay
Is no evidence:
Give me the good news
In the present the present tense.

What happened
Nineteen hundred years ago
May not have happened
How am I to know?

The living truth
Is what I long to see:
I cannot lean upon
What used to be.

So shut the Bible up
And show me how
The Christ you talk about
Is living now. 111

In the Present Tense

I share the desire expressed in this poem to experience our faith embodied ‘in the present tense’. Carter provides a critique of the modern quest to use the tools of reason to explain the faith. He expresses a longing for ‘present tense’ communication which is more than getting the words right. He expresses the human desire for an embodied relationship with God in the here and now with a possibility of sensing the presence of God in the dangerous, vulnerable and joyful experiences of human living.

Contemporary culture is skeptical about religion, and no amount of theological apologetics will provide convincing arguments. Many people long for a ‘living truth’ informed by ideas and tradition. They long for a truth that is deeper than words and more historical than history. This is a desire for a truth that is embodied in human lives in such a way that it can be seen and felt and breathed and heard: ‘And show me how/ The Christ you talk about is living now.’ Pamela Ann Moeller also expresses the need for an embodied encounter with God.

Words and concepts that appeal to the intellect, no matter how wonderful, are rarely enough for me ... I have needed God embodied in hands that bathed me, hands that put bread in my hands; I have needed God embodied in a nod of a head that could assure me from across the room that I am still God’s beloved. I needed God embodied for me.  

Moeller’s comments express a contemporary desire for theology to explore the human encounter with God alongside concepts about God.

**Body Mind Dualism**

The body mind dualism has its origins in Hellenistic Greco-Roman culture, in which the body and mind were considered antagonistic elements. The mind and use of reason were considered to be the source of objective knowledge, while the body, experience and feelings were considered subjective and therefore worthy of suspicion. The spirit was considered good and eternal, while the flesh, or matter, was believed to be temporal, corruptible and corrupting. The spirit/body split led people to believe that human relations with God only occurred in the spirit realm, and were therefore not embodied. This perspective had a powerful influence on the early church, an influence that continues today.

As discussed in chapter one, a paradigm shift occurred at the time of the Enlightenment with the move away from a God-centered worldview to a human-centered one. Descartes’ famous dictum, ‘I think therefore I am’, typified this shift. Cartesian dualism re-enforced Hellenistic dualism and added the weight of rational or empirical proof to the burden of theological argument. When the rational human mind is considered the center point from which all else is defined the dualistic separation of body and mind is emphasized and the human experience of God is labeled as subjective.

Christian thinking has inevitably responded to this dominant anthropocentric view. The modern worldview locates the mind and reason as the seat of theological reflection and, consequently, theology tends to follow a deductive pattern. James Nelson points out that ‘... male theologians, in particular, have long assumed that the arena of theology is that of spirit and mind, far removed from the inferior, suspect body’. This type of thinking promotes a theology which claims that communication begins with sound originating in God’s saying via the logos, which leads to a focus on the intellect and the oral. The tools of reason have been applied to deduce religious, moral and philosophical certainties.

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114 Nelson, p. 42.
Embodiment

Both ancient and modern dualism regarding the body and mind/spirit deny the reality that the mind is part of the body and that the body relies on the mind for its direction and protection. In fact neither holds greater status, nor can be separated from the other. In the same way, it is incorrect to suggest that the mind provides the only path of access to matters of the spirit and that the fleshly body is a distraction or diversion from God.

The proclamation of the liberating reign of God in human relationships has no need of any form of dualism. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth ... the Spirit of God hovered over the waters ... God spoke and there was light and darkness, water and sky, land, vegetation and animals. God spoke and there was life. In God's image God created both women and men, they together in good bodies, in the image of God (Gen. 1). ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and made its dwelling amongst us’ (John 1: 1 & 14a). Such is God - an eternal, creative energy, fleshly and dwelling amongst us. The Genesis stories of creation also affirm the interrelationship of word and action in creation. God speaks and there is action in creation. Human bodies are formed in the image of God and are good (Gen. 1: 31). In the beginning of the Christian story, the hospitality of Mary's womb became the dwelling place of God (Lk. 1: 31). God lived as all humanity, vulnerable and dependent on the love of others. God is incarnate, fleshly and dwelling amongst us.

The scriptures do not render the body subordinate or separate from the soul and the spirit. Jesus invites followers to join in a relationship of mutual abiding (Jn. 5: 38). The reign of God comes to people as a gift from God through the work of the Spirit.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you (Rom. 8:2-11).
Jesus teaches that God seeks to live in us, like a well of living water ‘gushing up to eternal life’ (Jn. 4: 14). God seeks to abide in us, as we abide in God: ‘those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit’ (Jn. 15: 5). In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he links this abiding relationship with embodiment: ‘Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not on your own?’ (1 Cor. 6: 19). Again, in the letter to Colossians he writes, ‘for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Col. 2: 9). Eric Ellison claims that ‘spiritual renewal is intimately bound up with justice-making and embracing the body as sacred territory’.

The holiness of the body is deeply rooted in the Christian scriptures. Paul, however, appears to employs the dualisms of the spirit and the flesh in some of his letters. He is understandably influenced by the Hellenistic dualism adhered to in the Gentile communities to which his is writing. Paul, however, uses the distinction between the physical and spirit realms when he contrasts the present age with the reign of God. (Rom. 7: 21-25) This is an apocalyptic view, which separates the physical and present time reality form the spiritual realm of the end time promise of the reign of God. (Rom. 18-25) The life, death and resurrection of Jesus has initiated, but not yet fully realised, the reign of God. Paul contrasts the human Spirit of this age and the breath of God coming to dwell within us. The dualism described in apocalyptic writing does not reflect Hellenistic dualism of the physical and spiritual, but a separation of the in breaking of God’s reign and of the rejection of God’s reign. When making ourselves bodily open to the indwelling of God’s Spirit, we become physically part of the Reign of God.

116 The word Spirit or pneuma refers to two things, first to the creative force or power of God. This reflects the Hebrew word ruah, which means breath. The Spirit of God is the power of creativity in creation; it is the breath of God, the breath that gives us life. The word is also used to refer to the human spirit. Greek philosophy refers to the human being make up of pneuma - spirit and sарx - flesh. Paul uses this contrast in his letter to the Romans, after all he is writing to a Gentile community who are familiar with Greek philosophy. Paul talks about both the human Spirit and the breath of God, which comes to dwell within us when he contrasts the old age with the new. (Rom. 8: 23)
Moltmann-Wendel also begins with the need to reject dualism. She points out the way in which dualism has shaped the way we think about ourselves. ¹¹⁷ For example, even as I write, a radio cricket commentator described one of the players: ‘his body is failing him’. Comments such as these reinforce the idea that our self is somehow separate from our body. Moltmann-Wendel argues that human beings are not separate from our bodies we are bodies. ‘Our bodies have a voice of their own which cannot be ignored’. ¹¹⁸ For example, in the process of conception the female is not a passive vessel waiting to be recipient of the male sperm. Both male and female make an active contribute to the formation of new life. The ovum is actively released from the ovary and goes through the fallopian tubes to nestle into the mucous membrane of the womb. The male activity may be more spectacular but the invisible ovum is deliberate and powerful. ¹¹⁹ God’s creative energy is at work in both male and female bodies as new life is conceived.

If we reject dualism, we must agree that words, actions and movements cannot be addressed separately. It is perhaps helpful to note that when thinking about the body and the human experience of God’s grace, modern theology has looked to what the abstract ideas about Christian faith say about the body and not how the subjective embodied experience might inform the Christian faith. Yet words, like those in the gospel flow from the mouths of human beings reflecting on their encounters with God. ¹²⁰

At the climax of chapter six of John's gospel Jesus identifies himself as the embodiment of God: ‘I am the living bread that comes down from heaven, I am the Son of the Father’ (Jn. 6:35). Using the same imagistic language, Jesus goes on to invite people to participate in the life of God in the world. ‘Whoever eats this bread will live forever, the bread I give for the

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life of the world is my flesh’ (Jn. 6: 41) When Jesus says, ‘I am life giving bread’ (Jn. 6: 48), he is not merely asking people to see and hear and believe his teachings, he is not just offering them physical food to eat like he did when he feed the five thousand on loaves and fishes (Mk. 6: 30-44). When he describes himself as life giving bread, he is saying that in his concrete humanity, in his flesh and blood, he is the actual presence of the life of God in the midst of human history.

The phrase ‘flesh and blood’ is still used today, as it was in Jesus’ time, to describe a kinship relationship. The phrase ‘You are my flesh and blood’ is equivalent to saying ‘I am related to you’. In John's gospel Jesus says that the mystery of God has become ‘flesh and blood’ in him. He goes on to say that the way to eternal life is to ‘eat his flesh and drink his blood’ (John. 6: 51). In this passage, Jesus is calling us beyond simply believing that he is the Word of God made flesh, but also partaking of his flesh and blood so that we too can join the familial relationship of abiding in the life of God as brothers and sisters of Christ.

There are many scriptural references to God’s work and life lived through human bodies. We can affirm that God the Creator continues the ongoing work of creation in and through human bodies. God in Jesus is incarnate in a human body and lives as the risen Christ in the bodies of believers; God the Holy Spirit dwells in us as we dwell in God. God calls us and offers us redemption and healing. God breathes life into us and prays for us to live full and joyful lives called as disciples of Christ. God seeks to dwell in us and guide us into life in the Spirit. The invitation of Christian discipleship is not just to learn about the faith we proclaim, but also to act out our faith as embodied beings.

**Christian faith & embodiment**

Consistent with the proposal that human beings can experience God’s grace, James Nelson offers a helpful insight. Nelson focuses on the incarnation as a means of speaking about the God’s embodied revelation. Our present embodied reality is the word made flesh.
The human body is language and a fundamental means of communication. We do not just need words. We are words. This conviction underlies the Christian belief in the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God was present in a human being … in a radical way that has created a new definition of who we are. 121

As noted in chapter one, debate about the human experience of God is extensive. If we affirm that our experience of God is embodied and incarnate, then God is a separate being who encounters us from beyond ourselves. We can encounter God’s grace as an inner movement or deepening awareness of who we are in relationship to God. As I concluded in chapter one, God is the ultimate subject. As such our primary concerns as embodied human beings called to be the people of God begins with the developing contemplative awareness of our inter-subjective relationship with God, and discerning the presence, guidance and movements of God in our lives.

Where the mind/body dualism questions the embodied experience of God, reclaiming the holiness of the body gives voice to God’s embodied presence. Human beings have long been able to sense God at work in and through their bodies. After all, the Christian faith began with Mary’s body becoming the site of revelation and redemption. In Mary’s body, God grew in the conception, pregnancy, birthing and mothering of Jesus. 122 A blind man’s eyes were healed when he washed away mud made of Jesus’ spit mixing spit with earth (Jn. 9: 1-7); John Wesley’s heart was strangely warmed as he prayed. God is conceiver and birth giver of the universe; incarnate in the life of Jesus and guiding presence in the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our bodies.

Adrian Thatcher argues that ‘embodiment must be rescued from dualism so that our bodies can be reclaimed from guilt, embarrassment and religious ambiguity and reaffirmed as the locus of our being as children of God’. 123 He notes four key ways in which the Christian faith

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121 Nelson, p. 52.
supports embodiment: the incarnation; the Eucharist; the embodied experience of the Holy Spirit; and the experience of communion with God.

Thatcher, along with Nelson, and others begins with the incarnation.

This is a God with a remarkable readiness to take on the conditions of mortal life, including vulnerability, responsibility, and risk. Through Jesus’ earthly ministry, God becomes directly involved in humanity’s suffering and joy. Christianity is the only world religion with a God who partakes of the fullness of human life. The incarnation brings God to life, out of the shadows of abstract images, vague distant awareness, and Platonic ideals. In the incarnation God becomes expressible ... this is an active God who transforms reality by embracing it.124

In Jesus, God takes on human form. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. In the enfleshment of the Word in Jesus, God the transcendent one joins the earthy life of the world as a human body. The incarnation is an ongoing reality, not simply a historical event. In the risen Christ, in our present embodied reality as the body of Christ, the Word is still made flesh. The Christian faith teaches of a God who gave birth to the universe and remains an intimate participant in the ongoing work of creation. God, the divine transcendent one, becomes intimately involved in humanity taking the form of a human being in the body of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity not only claims that God is incarnate in the historical life of Jesus, but also in the risen presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the lives of believers. As Christian people seek to live in the wisdom of Jesus, the community becomes the body of Christ. Christian lives are by necessity incarnate and human bodies are fundamental elements in the teaching and practice of Christian faith.

Thatcher's second point is that the Christian faith also supports embodiment through the Eucharist. The church community receives the gift of the body in the Eucharistic presence. With the words ‘this is my body’, the broken and self-giving body is at the heart of the faith.

The Eucharist reminds us that God is incarnate and present with us. As a mother gives her body to the birthing of a child, or a lover gives bodily to her lover the sacramental event of the Eucharist reminds us that Christ feeds us with His body.

The third way Thatcher identifies the Christian faith-supporting embodiment is listening for the movements of the Holy Spirit in our lives through the experiences of the body. Our bodies are constantly engaged in sensory experience. Our faith teaches that ‘in Jesus all of human life and creation has become a sign of God’s presence filled with sacraments.’ All we have to do is pay attention and learn to notice with eye, ears, hands, noises and tongues that sense God at work in our lives and in our world.

The fourth way the Christian faith supports embodiment is in the embodied experience of communion with God. As embodied beings, we encounter God in the world around us. As we become aware of God at work within us, this embodied knowing can become a form of communion with God. Deeper self-knowledge can lead to a deeper knowledge of God. This invites attention to the bodily experience of God at work all around and within. Where the mind/body dualism has focused the spiritual life on the immaterial and abstract, embodiment rediscovers the embodied awareness of communion with God.

To these four points I would add a fifth. The Trinitarian nature of the Christian faith also supports embodiment. Human beings are bodies, created in the image of the ‘Trinitarian God dancing in an eternal mutual exchange of self giving love.’ The nature of God is that of bodies in relationship with one another. The body of God in the world is a present, living, moving relationship of human beings with one another. The created universe is drawn toward interdependence in community. God becomes the Christ in death and resurrection and gifts us with the Spirit of love so that we, in community, become his risen flesh, the Body of Christ.

125 Thatcher, p. 40.
126 Thatcher, p. 42.
127 Kathleen Finley, Savoring God, Ave Maria Press, 2003, p.11.
128 Adrian Thatcher, p.43
129 Isherwood & Stuart, p. 150.
The term *ecclesia*, or church, refers to those ‘called out’ to become a community of God’s new creation. In the New Testament, there are many metaphors used to describe the church and each of these refers to the embodiment of God in human beings. One metaphor refers to the church as the people of God. This image illustrates the covenantal relationship between God and God’s people. Another set of metaphors refers to the church as the body of Christ, a vine with many branches or of a body with many parts. These organic images communicate the mutual dependence of members on one another and the role of Jesus Christ as source of life and direction. A third metaphor refers to the church as a servant people. Jesus is the servant Lord of the community. ‘The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk. 10: 45). The people of God are called to be helpers, co-workers and ambassadors for Christ. The church serves God as human bodies worship, pray, proclaim the Word and live out God’s call.

God cannot be confined to the cerebral workings of the mind, nor can words be separated from acts and movements. God is not limited as a separate being who encounters us from beyond ourselves. We can experience God’s grace as an inner movement or deepening awareness of who we are in God. Awareness of God’s presence is heightened by our ability to pay attention.
Chapter 4

MATERNAL EMBRACE

Introduction

In order to propose that an experience may be an embodied experience of grace, previous chapters have provided a theological framework for discussing God and human experience, explored the meaning of grace, and reclaimed embodiment. Attention now returns to the experience of maternal embrace. At the outset, I described a moment when embracing my young son, that I sensed a healing shift in myself. As I prayerfully reflected on that experience, I developed an awareness of God revealed in the moment and a desire to claim the moment as an embodied experience of grace. In spiritual direction, people frequently describe experiences with similar characteristics.130 The spiritual direction conversation assumes that such a moment could be an embodied experience of God’s grace and gives prayerful and discerning attention to developing awareness of God’s grace in the moment.

Spiritual Direction and the Discernment of Experience

Spiritual direction invites seekers into a safe and sacred space in which to become aware of and reflect on God’s intimate involvement in our living. The term ‘spiritual direction’, however, can be problematic. The terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘direction’ are open to misinterpretation. The term ‘direction’ can appear to suggest a process of one person directing another. The one-on-one spiritual direction relationship unfolds, however, as ‘pilgrim’ and ‘guide’ listen for the movements of the Holy Spirit in the pilgrim’s life. The direction being sought is God’s direction, or calling, for the pilgrim’s life. In this way, the

130 As previously stated, for ethical reasons I have not recorded here the content of spiritual direction sessions. Instead, I offer examples from my own experience.
spiritual direction conversation is a form of prayer. It is a conversation between two people where the focus is prayerful listening for God’s direction and grace through which both guide and pilgrim are transformed. Without such space, embodied experiences of God’s transforming grace are frequently dismissed, belittled or forgotten.

Spiritual director and psychologist, Gerald May, writes that ‘the essence of spiritual guidance can be seen whenever one person helps another to see and respond to spiritual truth.’  
Where other caring professions focus on the mental and emotional dimensions and aim to encourage the individual to function more effectively, the focus of spiritual direction is on religious experience and relationship with God. The intent is not so much on how to better function as an individual, but the surrender of the individual to the divine.

‘Spirituality’ is also an ambiguous word. In earlier centuries, Christians referred to spirituality as devotion, or piety. Currently the term ‘spirituality’ is used in a variety of ways. Broadly speaking it can be defined as the journey of the inner life. People’s inner journeys are also shaped by the circumstances of the social, political, gender, racial, cultural and religious contexts. Hence there are many different spiritualities. Spiritual director, Tinden Edwards, provides a helpful definition of the inner life.

[The inner life is] the subtlest dimensions of our awareness, where we sense ourselves belonging beyond our ego image to a larger, more valuable horizon of reality that impinges on all we are and do.

Although this horizon is ungraspable and beyond scientific descriptions, people throughout history have claimed to know its reality. Ronald Rolheiser’s definition of spirituality is also useful.

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133 Bradley P. Holt, Thirsty for God, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 5.
Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our Eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others and the cosmic world.  

Rolheiser’s definition implies that spirituality is not a commodity that we can choose to consume or discard. Our spirituality is a relationship with the life beyond our individuality that shapes who we are becoming. A Norwegian legend describes the human desire and searching for God: ‘before a soul is put into the body the soul is kissed by God and during all of its life on earth, the soul retains a dim, but powerful, memory of that kiss and relates everything to it.’ This story of receiving the kiss of God describes the restlessness human beings experience, which can lead people on a whole variety of different journeys in search of the sacred other. Hence there are many different expressions of spiritualities.

Margaret Gunther describes this spiritual searching as a deep inner question, which echoes that of the rich young man who asks Jesus, ‘good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ (Matt. 18: 18) Jesus responds to this question, not by suggesting a task, but by inviting us on a journey of self-discovery - to let go of the possessions that weigh us down so that we are free to follow Him.

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136 Rolheiser, p. 15.
It is clear that defining spirituality is not a simple task. William Johnston suggests that it is premature to codify a definition of spirituality. He calls spirituality a ‘cutting edge word of our time’. To define spirituality as the journey of the inner life is helpful, but incomplete. The inner life is characterised by deepening awareness of the horizon beyond the ego, which we call the sacred. Spirituality, however, is more than just awareness of the sacred; it is about our relationship with the sacred. This relationship stirs our desire, shapes our longings, informs our self-understanding and becomes our frame of reference for practising our spirituality.

A theology of Christian spiritual direction begins with God’s longing for us. God seeks us and knows us, when we stand and when we sit (Ps. 139). God’s desire for us stirs in us a desire for God and our heart’s longing for God. This restlessness, this inner yearning is the beginning of our response to God longing for us, and the focus of discernment in spiritual direction. Margaret Gunther affirms that pilgrims come to spiritual direction with a longing to be known by God and that this quest requires self-knowledge and relationship.

To know the truth, then, is to allow one’s self to be known … only by letting ourselves be known to each other and our deepest selves, can we feel the assurance that we are indeed known to God?

Spiritual direction provides opportunities for people to grow in knowledge of their deepest self, explore their relationship with life beyond their individuality and discover how God is shaping the person they are becoming. The images of ‘heart meeting heart’, ‘lover of souls’ and of ‘abiding in God’ express the focus of spiritual direction as prayer. In prayer we join the prayer of Christ and listen for the Spirit groaning within, the deep desire of God to find a home in us and the deep desire in us and to find a home in God. As Douglas Steere indicates, listening in this area involves a listening beneath the conscious words for the unconscious

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140 Guenther, p. 58 - 59.
movements of the soul.  

The Spirit of God is in and through the questions of our hearts and the desires, which they represent. The deepest questions of a person or of a people are always spiritual since they are the incarnation of Spirit in our life.

The spiritual direction relationship seeks to do just this: to create a safe holding space in which pilgrims can explore their deepest questions and inner longings, while being sensitive to divine grace in the ordinariness of life and alert to the possibility of the Spirit in the unexpected. The focus of the spiritual direction conversation rests in the human experience of God, but how do we know that we are listening to God and not to ourselves?

Discovering grace, the action of God in one’s life, is in no sense easy and requires extreme caution. Testing an experience for signs of God’s grace calls for discernment. Saint Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), influential Spanish founder of the Jesuits, developed a comprehensive set of rules for discernment, which he calls ‘Spiritual Exercises’. Ignatian discernment begins with the theological claim that our own deepest desires will correlate with the deepest orientation and desire of God within us. Thomas Hart states that ‘the will of God is ... manifest deep within. When we come in touch with our own deepest orientation and desire ... our own real interior realm, we have also found God’s direction for our lives.’

Attention to the movements of the Holy Spirit and seeking the direction, the will or knowledge of God can be observed in human experience.

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144 Haight, 1979, p. 11.
In previous chapters, grace has been defined as God’s self-communication, which can come into human consciousness as embodied experience. Ignatian discernment identifies such embodied experience as ‘inner movements’. Identifying and observing inner movements is central to the process of discernment. Ignatian discernment describes the inner movements which lead us closer to God as creating a sense of ‘consolation’ and an experience of peace, courage, strength, inspiration and God’s love. As Christian scriptures proclaim, God leads in the way everlasting, the way to freedom, hope, peace, joy and love. Ignatian discernment uses the term ‘consolation’ to describe the experience of living in the love and life of God.

Not all inner movements are movements of God. Ignatian discernment also describes inner movements that are counter to the leadings of God’s grace and pull us away from God. These are inner leadings and external forces that are counter to the movements of God’s good Spirit. Hence, inner movements leading away from God are described as ‘counter movements’. These create a sense of ‘desolation’, experiences of hopelessness, isolation, and self-centeredness. Human beings are created with the freedom to make choices for both good and evil. There is a sinful, brokenness in humanity that draws us away from living in the love of God.

Ignatius describes the characteristics of movements toward consolation and movements toward desolation. The Spirit of God is described as the Paraclete, the advocate or the defender, and the evil spirit as the Devil or the accuser. God’s grace draws us closer to God, where the destructive spirit drives us on our own way. God’s movements are gentle and full of wisdom, where the movements of the evil spirit can be violent and deceptive.

Gerald Hughes S.J. describes movements of God as leading to:

• Life that reaps the fruits of the Spirit.
• Living the way of Jesus, grounded, earthy, and drawing us into the Paschal mystery that leads from death to life.
• Living in relationship with the scriptures.

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• Living amidst the community of faith.
• Experience of consolation, which brings faith, hope, freedom, positive self-esteem and love.
• Receiving a gift, freely given to reveal deeper truth.
• A desire to serve God in life.  

Hughes also describes counter movements, movements away from God, which lead to:
• A closing down of self, which leads to isolation from others, community and from God.
• A covering of the truth.
• Getting lost, or stuck in the ‘death’ experience with no hope and no way forward into new life.
• Feelings of being driven, pressure and heaviness.
• Feelings of loss of self-esteem and fear.
• A self-serving aim in life.

Following the way of Jesus is not about feeling good or about an individualistic quest for wholeness. As Bonhoeffer notes, grace is costly. Grace leads us on a journey of discipleship which can take us through dark and painful places toward growth. We can grow through dying to an old self and birthing the new. Salvation can come when people, filled with grace, follow Christ in standing up for justice, peace and truth even when it may be dangerous to do so. In this sense, when life circumstances thrust us into the darkness of crisis, God’s grace can lead to a renewed awareness of the presence of God and guide us closer toward lives lived grounded in the grace of God. Edwards describes the way spiritual direction seeks to facilitate this shift.

Spiritual guidance out of a Christian tradition at its best is not meant to be a narrow ‘in house’ affair but a personal bridge to the Ground of all human life, on holding a particular broad lineage of experience an interpretation of that Ground. …

149 Hughes, p. 52 – 54.
150 See discussion in Chapter Two.
[Spiritual direction] is a bridge, a way in, to our shared Holy Ground available for all people yearning to touch that Ground more firmly ... the way of the future will be the way of the founder: not to expect the world to submit to clerical authority, but to transform the world by revealing the presence of God where it least expects to find it, in the everyday and the ordinary.  

Edwards describes the way in which discernment can act as a bridge into awareness of the ‘Holy Ground’ of God’s grace. This awareness is not simply for the nourishment of the isolated individual, but for the community of Christ seeking to follow the way of Jesus.  

Thus understood, discernment can be used as a tool to explore and test human experience for signs of God’s grace. In what follows, I apply tools of discernment to the lived experience of maternal embrace with which I introduced this thesis. I quote from my experience again to clarify the discussion.  

In the opening paragraph of my lived experience I described a sense of desolation. At the time I had been brought low by a workplace conflict that left me feeling battered and abused. This reflects my living in the brokenness of humanity. The tears that I could not hold back and the weight of accumulated stress created an inner movement away from community into a place of isolation where I felt drained of energy, weak and hopeless. I was feeling pressure and a sense of heaviness about my current circumstances accompanied by a loss of self-esteem. These emotions reflected the sense of desolation I was experiencing and bore the classic signs of counter movement.  

The second paragraph describes the observation I made at the end of the day. I perceived something had shifted in me as if a weight had been lifted. The shift in feeling, described in this experience, reflected qualities described by Ignatian discernment as a movement from desolation to consolation. The shift toward a lighter more relaxed and peaceful inner place echoes the characteristics of the movements of God’s spirit. I was able to be more attentive to

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the community around me and felt a sense of hopefulness. Having noticed a shift, I then sought to discern the source of the inner shift in an awareness prayer.

The embrace that I gave my son and the embrace I received in return provided the setting for an experience that points toward the embodied experience of embrace as God’s grace. This experience acknowledged the dark places of inner struggle. I experienced a graced moment that was not simply about feeling good about myself, but was about feeling embraced by God in the struggle. As I rested on the bed embracing my son, I became aware of God’s embrace. I felt God’s embracing grace in my suffering and this embrace led into new life.

Later, I became aware of the transformation that emerged from the embrace of God. This transformation reflects the pattern of the Paschal mystery. The way of Jesus Christ is a journey to the cross, which brings death and three days of waiting in the sense of God’s absence before the new life of resurrection. Movements of the Spirit can lead to a place where people experience pain and struggle, and the absence of God. Initially there was a sense of God’s absence in my experience, but this was transformed by my physical experience of embrace. In this sense, ‘absence in not simply the lack of presence; absence itself is often a mellow mode of being present.’ 152 My sense of the absence of God was transformed as I came to recognise God’s embracing presence.

Meister Eckhart uses the metaphor of gestation and birth to describe discernment and our awareness of the movements of God. ‘Tend only to the birth [of God] in you and you will find all goodness and all consolation, all delight, all being and all truth.’ 153 As I reflected on the shift I noticed in myself and prayed for awareness, I tended to the birth of God in myself.

Given that we believe that God created the universe and continues to participate in the ongoing work of creation, God’s nature is hospitable Trinitarian community, we are created in the image of God, then we can proclaim that we are called into communion with God. The

153 Meister Eckhart, quoted by Guenther, p. 68.
eschatological vision of God’s reign becomes a present reality as we respond to God calling us toward deep communion with God. God calls us from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, from death to life and this call is manifest in all things. The Christian faith proclaims that my son and I were not alone in our embrace. I sensed God with us drawing us into the community of Christ embodied in time and place and the particular embrace.

It took a while for the complexity of the experience to come into my conscious awareness. The experience came before the interpretation. Yet, when I did come to interpret the experience, I drew on my own immersion in the Christian narrative and my own formation in the web of Christian belief. My only response could be the primary Christian response to God’s work in creation: I responded with gratitude and adoration. I had a powerful desire to claim what felt like the awesome truth of the experience: namely that I had been touched by God’s grace in this moment.

**Maternal Embrace as a Metaphor for Experience of God’s Grace**

The action and experience of grace is a complex event, which may be examined as metaphor. Sally McFague, in her work on metaphorical theology, argues that metaphor not only aids our language for God, but also is essential to it. She argues that religious language is increasingly problematic and identifies two critical issues: idolatry and irrelevance.

The modern western cultural context of secular pluralism, discussed in chapter one, erodes an awareness of the divine mystery. There is a grave risk of identifying God with the words we use to describe God. In this sense, religious language can become idolatry.

If we turn God into the metaphors we use to describe God, we place idolatrous limits on God. All the affirmations we make about God do not limit God. In this way, and all others, God is transcendent. It is important to guard against appropriating to God the *maternal embrace*. God transcends any metaphor we may employ to describe our encounter with God.

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McFague also asserts that religious language risks becoming irrelevant. The language of faith can become nothing more than empty words describing ideas people have come to consider sentimental and patriarchal. Religious language is, however, primarily metaphorical. The language used in Christian scriptures to describe the action and nature of the divine is constantly metaphorical.

Metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this’, so we use ‘that’ as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.

The word ‘metaphor’ literally means ‘to carry over’ and can provide a fruitful tension by holding different ideas together even when they may appear contradictory. For example, Christian scriptures frequently use the metaphor of ‘heart’ when locating in human beings the source of connection with God. ‘You examine me and know me, you know when I am standing or sitting … God examine me and know my heart, probe me and know my thoughts’ (Ps. 139). The heart is the place of yearning and desire: ‘God grant the desires of the heart’ (Ps. 20). Ideas about the heart carry over and inform ideas about our inner orientation toward God, which is a ‘lesser-known’ encounter.

The heart can be oriented toward God and, at times, away from God: ‘people approach me only in words, honour me only with lip-service while their hearts are far from me’ (Isa. 29: 13). Jesus uses the metaphor of heart to describe our inner orientation: our hearts can be blind, obdurate and closed (Mk. 8: 17); sluggish and slow (Lk. 24: 25); full of darkness,
weighed down with pleasure and sorrows (Matt. 13: 15). 159 Yet, God seeks us out, frees our hearts and restores relationship.

I shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and all your idols. I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you, I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you… (Ezek. 36: 25-27).

The heart is a helpful metaphor for describing our inner orientation in relationship with God. Like our heart, our inner orientation in relation to God is hidden, yet vital. As we give our hearts in love to God, as we become aware of the Spirit already praying within us, relationship with God is born. 160 In our heart, where our truest, most real self resides, God meets us and draws us toward life in the Holy Trinity.

Such a metaphor can emerge as the work of an individual who has a flash of personal insight. But metaphor can also gain wider appeal and become a form for ordering more universal experience. McFague calls these dominant metaphors a model. 161 For example, the metaphor of father has become a model for God, which suggests a ‘comprehensive ordering structure with impressive interpretive potential.’ 162 Metaphor, therefore, also requires the interpretive activity of conceptual interpretation and criticism. 163 As people seek to speak of what we glimpse of the divine mystery, we have no other language but that of metaphor. A critical interpretation of metaphorical language for God encourages exploration of non-idolatrous and relevant metaphors.

159 Louf, p. 19-20.
160 Louf, p. 21.
161 Mc Fague, p. 23.
162 Mc Fague, p. 23
163 Mc Fague, p. 25.
Maternal Embrace

The phrase *maternal embrace* can be understood as a metaphor when seeking to describe experiences of God’s grace. To employ Mc Fague’s definition, there is a thread of similarity between the two dissimilar events of experience: of God’s grace and the *maternal embrace*. The language of one ‘greater known’ experience, *maternal embrace*, can be understood as a metaphor to carry over and inform awareness of something about a ‘lesser known’ experience, God’s grace. While they are not identical, they are metaphorically and existentially related.

The experience of *maternal embrace* is a vital part of human living. As active participant in the ongoing work of creation, our mother’s bodies join with God in the art of creation. Every human begins life carried in the all-embracing womb of a mother. We are formed in the image of God and born into the world, helpless, in need of nurture, yet full of potential (Gen. 1: 26-27). We are born into the waiting embrace of our mothers, fathers and community, all of whom form the body of Christ embracing us. We are embraced by a maternal energy and strength that calls communities to nurture new life. In her beautiful book of photographs called ‘Mother and Child’, Nell Dorr beautifully describes the everlasting story of the embrace welcoming new life at birth.

The story is from everlasting to everlasting. Yet when it happens to you, that your new-born child is laid, for the first time in your arms, it is the whole miracle of creation and your heart cries out as did Mary’s: ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord.’ You know without being told that you are as near to touching the divine mystery as one may come in this life.

*Maternal embrace* is motherly holding, where a mother’s body can be physically holding, enclosing or protecting. *Maternal embrace* also extends beyond the physical to emotional and spiritual nurturing, encouraging and enabling. A *maternal embrace* is not the exclusive

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offering of a biological mother, but it is any embrace flowing out of the energy and gift of mothering. This mothering energy can be soft and nurturing and also powerful and fiercely protective.

A *maternal embrace* creates a safe space for nurture and protection not only of young children, but also for the adult. Adults often yearn for *maternal embrace*, especially when feeling vulnerable. *Maternal embrace* can be that which offers support and encouragement when stepping out into challenges. It can also be an enduring and protective embrace that carries us through times of struggle and suffering. In this sense, *maternal embrace* can provide a holding space in which children, and later adults, can experience freedom, love and transformation.

Profound psychological, spiritual and social damage can occur when children do not experience *maternal embrace*. A person working with homeless young people, whose mothers are unable to embrace their children, describes the profound longing his clients have for their mother’s embrace. 165 There has been extensive research done into the importance of babies bonding with the primary care givers to their psychological health and development. The provision of an embracing nurturing environment is a critical aspect of early childhood development.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that for many people the experience of mothers and of mothering is less than positive. Some will respond negatively to the metaphor of *maternal embrace*, just as some respond negatively to the church’s use of the metaphor of father to describe God’s relationship with humanity. For some, the metaphor *maternal embrace* may evoke confused memories of abandonment or smothering. In her reflection on the metaphor of ‘mother church’, Sally Cunneen identifies two contrasting attitudes to mothering. One is reflected in the overprotective mother who stifles growth. This contrasts with the

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empowering mother who enables those in her care to become independent. In reality, women live out both these attitudes in their mothering.

*Maternal embrace* involves significant self-sacrifice and therefore must not to be idealised. A woman cannot become a mother without giving her body to the growing of a new life. Pregnancy causes significant discomfort and pain to women. Morning sickness, back pain, tiredness, reduced mobility, labour pain and medical intervention all induce a degree of loss. For some, providing *maternal embrace* can even lead to loss of life. Beyond pregnancy and birth, parenting is a life-long relationship of great joy and great challenge. For some, the metaphor of *maternal embrace* may evoke memories of the painful and perhaps impossible tasks of parenting.

When I employ the metaphor of *maternal embrace* to describe the embodied experience of God’s grace, I seek to offer a symbolic idea of the kind of embracing experience for which human beings long to receive. The *maternal embrace* includes the reality of what it means to offer mothering, in all its messiness and self-sacrifice. The *maternal embrace* is also something the mother needed and needs herself in order to nurture her own child. *Maternal embrace* is offered by one who listens to us; shares herself with us; and, in the process, enables us to become the people we are called to be; and then lets us go. The metaphor of *maternal embrace* reflects the characteristics we use to describe God’s grace. Grace reflects the free gift of God’s covenantal relationship with humanity of love and mercy. And through God’s grace we grow into the graces given to us (1 Cor. 3: 10). Through grace we grow into our calling (Gal. 1: 15) and giftedness for living. The metaphor of *maternal embrace* is a helpful way to describe God’s grace experienced as blessing, giftedness and intimate relationship with God.

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166 Cunneen, p. 31 - 50.
Beyond the loss of our physical mothers, we continue to need to give and receive the kind of embrace Cunneen describes as ‘good mothering’. We need to participate in and receive the kind of embrace that helps us rediscover vital connections integrating our spirituality and our living, our personalities and our experience.¹⁶⁷ Cunneen identifies three essential elements of good mothering: nurturing, enabling and enduring.¹⁶⁸ In what follows, I draw on Cunneen’s elements of mothering as a structural framework for exploring the metaphor of maternal embrace.

**Nurturing Embrace**

The nurturing maternal embrace provides a safe space in which the vulnerable child can be free to grow emotionally and physically. The womb is the first space of nurturing maternal embrace. Then, after birth, the embracing mother’s lap ideally provides the primary place of nurture. As children grow, learn to walk and explore they move from the safety of their mother’s lap, but frequently return to the nurturing embrace for comfort and protection.

There are many scriptural examples of God providing the nurturing, womb-like maternal embrace. The Hebrew word rehem, meaning female lap, uterus, or womb is just as frequently used in the Hebrew scriptures as the word for heart.¹⁶⁹ Yet, only with recent work by feminist scholars has the implications of the Biblical meaning of womb been explored.¹⁷⁰ In the Israelite imagination, the female womb belongs to God. The scriptures describe God opening and closing the womb. Only God can give pregnancy. For example, when Rachel pleads for a son, Jacob responds with a statement reflecting his conviction that it is God who controls the womb: ‘Am I in the place of God who had withheld from you the fruit of your womb?’ (Gen. 30: 1-2). God also acts as midwife. ‘Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept

¹⁶⁷ Cunneen, p. 4.
¹⁶⁸ Cunneen, p. 54.
me safe on my mother’s breast’ (Psalm 139: 13-16).

In Israel a woman’s fruitful womb and the breasts with their milk were an image of blessing not produced by human effort, but to be received solely as a gift from God … Thus in Jacob’s blessing God’s favor is invoked on Joseph: ‘with blessings of heaven above, blessing of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breast and of the womb’ (Gen. 49: 25).  

*Rehem* provides the root of the word *raham*, which means to have compassion, mercy or sympathy. God’s compassionate and merciful attitude toward Israel is compared with that of the mother’s love for her child. ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you’ (Isa. 49: 15). Here God is described as having motherly emotions that sustain God’s relationship with Israel, even when Israel is rebellious and turns from God. God’s nurturing maternal embrace is given even more generously than the powerful nurturing embrace experienced by mothers. In this way, the metaphor of *maternal embrace* is used to describe God’s relationship with Israel and God’s grace.

The nurturing aspect of *maternal embrace* is frequently represented in Christian art in the image of Mary with the infant Jesus on her lap. From the safety of the *maternal embrace*, the infant Jesus faces the world. The nurturing *maternal embrace* is a place from which new life sees limitless possibilities. Mary represents the protective nurturing grace of God. She holds in her lap the fruit of God’s promise, the Christ, the one in whom God’s vision for creation will be restored. The embrace of Mary and the Christ Child represents for us the nurturing

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171 Staubli & Schroer, p. 74 - 75.
172 Staubli & Schroer, p. 72.
173 Staubli & Schroer, p. 79.
174 A convent in Italy where orphan babies were cared for has a special revolving basket in the convent front door so that babies could be left there anonymously rather than be abandoned to die in wilderness. An abandoned child could be placed in the basket on the outside of the door and then the basket would revolve around so the baby could pass through a space in the door and be received on the inside of the convent. Painted on the inside of the
nature of maternal embrace. As an embodied experience of grace, the Madonna and Child is perhaps the most consistently reproduced theme in the history of Western art. The motif of Madonna and Child has spread throughout the Christian world.

Some representations contextualise the Madonna and Child within the broader narrative of the Gospels, while others are representations of perfect beauty, love and embrace. For example, Raphael's Tempi Madonna\(^\text{175}\) has her Christ Child wrapped in a close maternal embrace.\(^\text{176}\) The Madonna, representing an image of maternal love, bends her head closer to her child.

In contrast to Raphael’s style of painting, Bellini’s various versions of his ‘Madonna and Child’ are considered ‘more theological than human’.\(^\text{177}\) In Bellini’s Madonna degli alberetti,\(^\text{178}\) for example, Madonna is holding her child carefully, but in a way removed from her body. Mary’s face conveys some ambivalence. She is carefully watching her child, but appears unsure about Him or about their relationship. The child is watching the viewer. His gaze is not at all loving or childlike. Rather, it is the gaze of a tired old man who appears wary.\(^\text{179}\) Mary has brought this child into the world only to watch him die, and the Christ Child's wary gaze suggests a bitter knowledge of the difficulties and obstacles that await him on the road to Calvary.

The suffering in Mary’s face is shared by all mothers and is an aspect of providing maternal embrace. The lap of embrace is a nurturing launching point from which a child will become an adult and venture into an unknown future. The metaphor of maternal embrace as an embodied experience of God’s grace reminds us that the grace of God is given as a free gift of nurture. God’s embrace is a safe and nurturing place from which we can face our future with courage.

door is a picture of the Holy family. When the basket containing an abandoned child revolved around the baby was received into the embrace of Mary’s lap. This convent door is a wonderful symbol of maternal embrace. Every child is embraced on lap of Mary and by the grace of God.

\(^{175}\) Raphael, The Tempi Madonna, 1508, Oil on wood, 75 × 51 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. See Appendix.
\(^{178}\) Giovanni Bellini, Madonna degli Alberetti, 1487, Oil on panel, 74 x 58 cm., Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice. See Appendix.
\(^{179}\) Goffen, p. 53.
We, like the Christ Child in Bellini’s painting, might sit on the lap of God who nurtures us into life with a sense of ambivalence about the future.

Mary’s lap is a holding environment, which speaks of the continuity of the human desire for secure mothering. Most human beings have been held in the safe and nurturing environment of the mother’s lap. On the lap of our mothers, we are fed and comforted, protected and can safely learn about the world around us. The nurturing mother’s lap is an archetypal place of human desire.

We can also identify with Mary as providing the nurturing environment for another person’s life. Connecting with Mary reminds us of our participation in the sharing of God’s maternal embrace. Trudelle Thomas writes of her sense of connection with Mary as a new mother of a small child.

Standing before the triptych of Mary and Jesus, I felt an internal shift – a momentary sense of not just being in relationship with God but actually identifying with God. Mary and Jesus so clearly mirrored my own lived experience that for a moment I seemed to be sharing in God’s work of creation, part of the grand and holy process of nurturing new life. ¹⁸⁰

Exploring the spirituality of mothering, Laura Chester writes about the physical changes women experience in pregnancy and early parenting that prepares them to provide a maternal embrace for their children.¹⁸¹ Women often describe the experience of early parenting as ‘a fuzz’. An engineer, who has became a new mother, described the contrast between the lineal,

¹⁸¹ Laura Chester, ed, Cradle and All, Farber and Farber, Boston, 1989, p. 1-4, uses the metaphor of ‘dilating’ to describe a spiritual opening to the life of the new baby. Chester parallels the physical opening in women’s bodies during pregnancy with an opening of the heart to provide the maternal embrace for their child.
logical thinking required by her profession and the intuitive circular activity of mothering.\textsuperscript{182} Women can become frustrated and dismissive of this state of feeling ‘muddle brained’. Providing the nurturing \textit{maternal embrace} of early parenting requires a different kind of activity and skill than that of the public world of work.\textsuperscript{183}

A baby is a question mark and his mother the answer he seeks. Sensitive to every new encounter, the newborn experiences life through the soft filter of mother’s embrace, her milk, her lullabies. He recognizes you by sight and by touch – you sense his needs and his separate self. Together you will learn.\textsuperscript{184}

Discovering how to provide a nurturing \textit{maternal embrace} for a vulnerable newborn requires the kind of intuitive thinking Dana Raphael describes as ‘matresence’.\textsuperscript{185} This is not the task of an engineer. Logic is not enough to provide a baby with \textit{maternal embrace}. Ideally, mothers bond with their baby in the hours after birth through skin-to-skin embrace, eye contact, voice, and the embrace of breast-feeding. Over the months of early parenting, mothers learn to read their babies intuitively and the baby develops a fundamental trust necessary for healthy living. Educational psychologists highlight the fundamental importance of the ‘holding environment’ of \textit{maternal embrace} at every stage of the life span in fostering human development.\textsuperscript{186} The ‘fuzz’ of early parenting aids the essential bonding process, opens an ability to ‘think with the heart’\textsuperscript{187} and creates space for the \textit{maternal embrace} which nurtures a new-born.

My experience of breastfeeding my third child provides another example of the way in which the nurturing aspect of \textit{maternal embrace} can function as a metaphor of an embodied experience of grace.

\textsuperscript{182} This comment comes from a friend describing the transition into motherhood.\textsuperscript{183} Chester ed., p. 1. \textsuperscript{184} Deborah Jackson, \textit{Mother and Child}, Duncan Baird Pub., London, 1999, p. 69. \textsuperscript{185} Dana Raphael, \textit{The Tender Gift: Breast Feeding}, Schocken Books, New York, 1976, p.19. \textsuperscript{186} Cunneen, p. 53, cites D.W. Winnicott as originating the term ‘holding environment’ for healthy childhood development and Robert Kegan as extending this theory to include adult development.\textsuperscript{187} Thomas, p. 23.
I remember sitting breast-feeding my third child, I breathed deeply and turned my awareness to God’s presence with us. My baby was sucking ferociously, wonderful warm nourishing milk flowed freely. I felt the warmth of God’s arms embracing me. I felt the warm nourishing breath of God mingled with mine as I embrace this little one.

Babies have a natural instinct to suck. They are born with body knowledge. Just rub the nipple against the baby’s cheek to stimulate the ‘rooting reflex’. A mouth will open wide and ready. Put a nipple deep into a baby’s waiting mouth and tight suction lips grasp the stretchable flesh. The nipple is sucked deep into their mouth and squeezed with tongue against the hard pallet to stimulate milk flow, and milk will flow, life will flow.

Milk gushed forth: gulp, suck, and swallow. My body knows how to produce the food that enabled my son to grow 3kg in five months. They say breast milk changes to perfectly match the growing baby’s needs. Breasts even know how to produce perfect milk for a premature baby. The wisdom of maternal embrace still baffles the medical profession. Bodies have a well of wisdom our minds cannot yet comprehend.

As I sat feeding my third baby, I remembered the path that led me to that point. Breastfeeding had not been accomplished without challenge and trauma. With the birth of my first child I had assumed that it would just happen. I could make my body do it! I soon learned that like all creative acts breastfeeding is an art to be learned with practice. I suffered through breast engorgement, nipple damage, mastitis and milk supply issues. I had to let go of ‘doing it’, and learn to listen to my body-wisdom and the wisdom in my baby’s body. My babies and I have discovered the ease and beauty of breastfeeding. So it is with God. Prayer is an art that grows through the struggle and becomes more beautiful with practice. By the time I was feeding my third baby I was able to rest in the gift of maternal embrace.188

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188 I wrote this reflection on breastfeeding in 2004.
Awareness of God’s presence welled up in my body as I embraced my child. I also created space in myself for my baby to encounter God through me. As milk flowed to nurture my child, I felt that God fed me. The milk of God’s love gave me the nourishment I needed and I experienced a sense of encounter with God’s grace.

This kind of experience is often accompanied by the critique of experience discussed in previous chapters. As stated, modern western philosophy is built upon a suspicion of the body. Our culture instructs us not to listen to these inner feelings, but to apply the tools of reason. For example, there is medical language for pregnancy and birth, and commercial language for all the products marketed to new parents. Yet, there is limited language to describe the spiritual and emotional encounter between mother and child. The language of maternal embrace as an embodied experience of grace affirms the wisdom and the deeply transformative nature of early motherhood. It also provides significant theological language for interpreting an awareness of God’s grace in the provision and receiving of maternal embrace.

I witnessed another embodiment of God’s maternal embrace as I sat in a very adult worship service behind a mother and the only child in the church. As we sang the Charles Wesley hymn, ‘Love divine all loves excelling’, the boy of two or three years stretched his arms around his mother. With one small hand he gently stroked her shoulder as his head nestled into the nape of her neck. He kissed her and reached his other arm round her back pulling her close in embrace as she in turn embraced him. This was the moment in worship for me when the Word became flesh. ‘Jesus thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art. Visit us

Accompanying my experience of breastfeeding and the affirmation of profound body knowing, I also noticed a counter movement in me that tried to undermine the sense of awareness of grace in this encounter. I sensed the counter movement as a warning not to listen to my body. I cannot use the tools of logical thinking to prove the presence of God. As a result, people often speak of awareness of grace with a sense of confusion or suspicion. Claiming the metaphor of maternal embrace strengthens and affirms the experience of grace when it emerges in the context of mothering.
with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.’ The nurturing *maternal embrace* of God flows from mother to child and child to mother. God’s saving grace of pure unbounded love flows from God to us and from us to God. As I witnessed this *maternal embrace* my heart did tremble. The experience of grace was embodied.

**Enabling Embrace**

The *maternal embrace* also enables children to grow in freedom and become adults. As children learn to crawl and walk they venture from their mother’s lap to investigate their environment and learn skills for living. Confident of the nurturing they have received, children are enabled to step towards independence. The enabling *maternal embrace* ‘trusts her children to be independent, knowing that the relationship between them must constantly change if all are to grow and form new communities.’

Alongside the nurturing *maternal embrace*, the enabling elements of *maternal embrace* are also reflected in the scriptures as a feature of God’s grace. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott explores biblical images of God as feminine. She notes that alongside the biologically feminine images of God as birthing or suckling humankind, there are many descriptions of God providing an enabling *maternal embrace* in the action of traditionally women’s work. Activities that could be done by men or women, but the gender roles of Biblical times would have only attributed to women are attributed to God. God is frequently described as providing for humanity in distinctively female activities. God shares the patient, yearning and tenderness of maternal love and does the kind of work done by women for centuries. Typically female parenting is attributed to God: ‘I myself taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in my arms, yet have they not understood that I was the one looking after them’ (Hosea

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191 Cunneen, p. 60.
193 Mollenkott, p. 27.
God provides an enabling embrace for Her human children in the acts of feeding (Ezek. 3: 1-6), baking bread (Mat.13: 33), guiding (Ps. 73: 23), protecting (Ps: 121: 1), healing and disciplining (Hosea 11), comforting (Isa. 66: 13), teaching (Prov. 22: 17), washing (Ezekiel 36: 25), clothing (Gen. 3: 21), wiping away tears (Rev. 21: 4). These are activities of maternal embrace that enable children to live, grow and act in their community. In some cases the embrace may not be physically present, yet these are all activities in which there is an enabling emotional and psychological embrace.

The enabling embrace of God is also described in the scriptures using images of God as mother eagle.\(^\text{194}\) God is described in Exodus as bearing ‘… you up on eagles wings’ (Ex. 19: 4); and in Deuteronomy: ‘As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead Jacob …’ (Deut. 32: 11–12. K.J.V.\(^\text{195}\)). The image of God as mother eagle describes God’s relationship with her children as one offering an embrace that enables the young to fly from the nest out into the world and become self-sustaining.\(^\text{196}\) Mother eagles take their young on their wings and then swoop down so the young are forced to fly on their own. She will stay close and swoop under them again when they cannot continue on their own. The mother eagle provides, on her wing, the enabling maternal embrace human beings also need as we take up our own independence and freedom. Isaiah also uses the image of God as the mother eagle:

\begin{quote}
Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles … (Is. 40: 31-32).
\end{quote}

God, as described in the image of the mother eagle, actively empowers Her young. She enables us to move from the nurturing nest to take flight on our own wings, hunt for our own

\(^{194}\) Mollenkott, p. 83.
\(^{195}\) The King James Version is used here as many other translations us a male pronoun and thus assumes the mother eagle is male.
\(^{196}\) Mollenkott, p. 84.
food, live in freedom and survive. The enabling *maternal embrace* provides a safety net when we are falling, home when we feel lost and healing when we are wounded. The *maternal embrace* enables us to recover and return to face the challenges ahead.

The sense of enabling *maternal embrace*, like that of being caught on an eagle’s wings, is echoed in a poem I wrote in response to the embrace of my son I described at the beginning of this thesis:

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Beloved Christ
It is you I seek, when struggle comes.
The ones I thought companions,
Have, unwittingly, turned to attack.
I fear for my wellbeing
Who am I in this?
Loss of centred confidence prevails,
Until, in your arms I am caught,
As unexpected, my child clutches arms around my neck.
With tender love and passion,
I am healed by grace alone.
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**Enduring Embrace**

The enduring embrace is also an aspect of *maternal embrace*. Mothers continue to embrace their children even to the point of enduring great suffering. The scriptures provide examples of grace as the enduring *maternal embrace* of God in the story of Ruth embracing her mother-in-law Naomi and thus embracing Naomi’s God. Naomi and her two daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah were all widowed and living in a foreign land in a time of famine. When Naomi decided to return to her homeland, she encouraged her daughters-in-law to return to their own mothers. Orpah goes, but Ruth ‘clings’ to Naomi saying: ‘do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die’ (Ruth 1: 16-17).

197 Ruth’s commitment to Naomi is an example of an enduring *maternal embrace*. Here, the

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197 Mottenkott, quotes Phyllis Trible’s research, p. 55.
maternal embrace is a commitment until death. Although children become adults, leave home and live well beyond their mother’s physical embrace, the connection between a mother and her children endures beyond death, even in this example of a non-biological relationship between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law.

Naomi and Ruth offered one another an enduring embrace in the context of a patriarchal culture in which widows had no status or protection. They were nonentities. These women had no brothers or sons to offer them shelter. In a culture where there was no one responsible to ensure that their lives endured, they only had the maternal embrace they embodied for one another. At the heart of Ruth’s embrace of Naomi was a commitment to Naomi’s God. Ruth embraces God and God embraces Ruth. As these women walked in God’s embrace, they found a husband for Ruth in Boaz, and Ruth had a son Obed, thus their lives endured and were renewed. Their embrace not only endured for their lifetime, but Ruth became the great grandmother of King David and in turn one of the foremothers of Jesus.

Another biblical image of the enduring maternal embrace has been depicted in religious art as the Pieta. This image depicts the moment Jesus is taken down from the cross and held in His mother’s arms. Enduring her own extreme suffering, ‘the mother continues to hold her son, refusing to abandon Him in death and disgrace, as most of His followers do’. Mary not only suffers with her child, but also continues to hold Him through His suffering. A mother’s enduring embrace is a powerful metaphor for God’s compassionate grace.

We see in the paintings of Bellini, a powerful connection between the nurturing embrace and the enduring embrace when we compare his Madonna with the Sleeping Child199 with his Pieta.200 Bellini paints the child Jesus sleeping on his mother’s lap, his arm hanging loosely over Mary’s leg. Jesus appears almost ready to slip away. In the Pieta, Bellini depicts the adult Christ taken

198 Cunneen, p. 62.
199 Bellini, Madonna Enthroned Adoring the Sleeping Child, 1475, Tempera on wood, 120 x 65 cm., Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice. See Appendix.
200 Bellini, Pietà, 1505, Oil on wood, 65 x 90 cm., Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. See Appendix.
from the Cross lying dead across his grieving mother's lap. In the Pieta the pose of Christ, his arm hanging loosely at the side, is similar to his pose in the Sleeping Child. Bellini’s two paintings of Mary embracing her son reflect the scope of maternal embrace. Maternal embrace is offered as a nurturing environment in which a person feels safe enough to grow and learn. Maternal embrace extends beyond the gift of safety and nurture, enabling and support, to include enduring suffering.

I experienced the power of enduring maternal embrace when my youngest child’s life was threatened by severe croup. His airways were swollen and blocked. A tube was put down his throat to enable him to breathe. I held my son in my arms as skilled professionals assessed and aided us and we were drawn very quickly into the embrace of the hospital. He was monitored in intensive care for ten days until the tube could be removed and he could breathe on his own again. As I stayed with my son through those days in hospital I experienced and witnessed in others the power of enduring maternal embrace, I found myself sensing a connection with the enduring embrace mothers everywhere offer to their children. I wrote about the experience toward the end of our time in hospital:

I held my breath and remembered: arriving at Hospital; the operation; recovery room with my son, his eyes taped shut; the ambulance journey from the Austin to the Children’s hospital and finding the Intensive Care Unit. I remembered the uncertainty and the waiting. Other children came into my mind and their hopeful parents by their sides: the boy who died and his father; the yellow girl waiting for a transplant; the mother who could not hold her baby; the baby with no visitors at all. I remembered children with a long journey ahead into shorted life spans. There was a sad silent mother of a baby clutching at life, and a far too chatty couple who talked in a strange detached way telling me their baby had just been diagnosed with a genetic disorder. I felt the overwhelming weight of all that sadness. In my gratitude for the embrace and care we had received, I became aware of the lack of medical facilities in so many other countries and I noticed a sense of connectedness with suffering children and families around the world.
I took another breath and felt myself relax. Unintended unexpected words of prayer formed on my lips and echoed through my body, embracing the enduring sadness.

Hail Mary full of grace  
The Lord is with thee,  
Blessed art thou amongst women,  
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus -  
And blessed are all wombs,  
And all children.  
Holy Mary mother of God,  
Pray for us sinners now,  
And at the hour of our death-  
And the dead boy’s death,  
And those who work with those close to death,  
And my son who has not died,  
And those ones who do die of croup.  
Amen.  

This description of an intense period of fear and helplessness as my child struggled to breathe, is an example of the enduring nature of maternal embrace as metaphor for God’s enduring grace. As I embraced my son through his struggle with illness, I felt alive with new awareness. I had encountered the place where life comes close to death and known the intensity and sadness of parents holding their children in their suffering. Although I was not always conscious of it, I fell into the arms of God’s embrace as we endured the time of waiting for healing to come. I felt held by God and sensed God’s tears connecting me with pain beyond my own. I felt connected with the enduring love of God embracing all the

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201 Excerpt from the story I wrote about the experience of having my one year old son in hospital for 12 days with croup. June 2004.
suffering in the world.

The ‘Hail Mary’ emerged as a prayer connecting my experience with the maternal embrace of Mary. In the Catholic tradition, Mary represents the maternal embrace of God for humanity, which endures throughout the ages. Jesus speaks from the cross to the disciple whom he loved and pointed to Mary saying ‘this is your mother’ (Jn. 19: 27). This gesture has been interpreted to suggest that Mary, the mother of Christ, can be recognised as the mother of the church. 202 The ‘Hail Mary’ prayer, which is very new to me and quite fresh and powerful, acknowledges Mary as blessed and, connects Mary with all women and acknowledges the blessed ‘fruit of all wombs’. As we ask for pray for ‘us sinners’, we acknowledge ourselves as people in need of relationship with God. When we ask for prayer ‘now and at the hour of our death’, there is a powerful recognition of the fragility of all life and our desire to be held in the enduring prayerful embrace of God now and beyond this life into death.

**Grace and Maternal Embrace**

Grace is ‘how God deals with people concretely in this world … [and] the way in which God’s love manifests itself in the life of human beings.’ 203 The concrete way in which God deals with people takes shape as embodied in human experience. Indeed, as Tina Beattie reminds us, we are called to embody grace:

> [W]e are called to be graced creatures who, as beings alone before God and as beings who are never truly alone, are invited to participate in the divine life of Christ in all its mystery and coming to perfection. As social, sexual and spiritual bodily beings, we are an enigma to ourselves and to one another, for what we are becoming is

hidden in God. But we also have a capacity for constant revelation and transformation, rooted in our ability to give and receive of ourselves in reciprocal relationships of human and divine love, tenderness and desire.\footnote{Tina Beattie, \textit{Woman: New Century Theology}, Continuum, London, 2003, p. 225.}

Our ability to give and receive of ourselves in reciprocal relationships of human and divine love, tenderness and desire is well represented in the metaphor of \textit{maternal embrace}. The experience of \textit{maternal embrace} with which this thesis began reflects an awareness that what we are becoming is hidden in God; the \textit{maternal embrace} does not provide a clear map of our future direction. Yet the nurturing, enabling and enduring aspects of the \textit{maternal embrace} reflect our capacity for constant revelation and transformation. The physical embrace embodied God’s grace in a way that stimulates awareness of God’s healing and transforming presence. It is within the reciprocal relationship of human and divine love, tenderness and desire that grace is encountered. Beattie suggests it is this love, tenderness and desire that can become known to us in \textit{maternal embrace} which is the root of revelation and transformation. It is through awareness of God’s embrace that we are transformed. Thus, it is through grace that we become creatures who are able to respond to the invitation to participate in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. \textit{Maternal embrace} acts as an important metaphor for the embodied experience of grace.
CONCLUSION

When we pray for the grace of God to be with us all, we speak about God’s self-communicating loving, forgiving, saving presence in our lives, the life of community and in all of creation. God participates in creation as the transcendent one - beyond all things, and also as the Incarnate One - within all things. We encounter God both beyond us and embodied amongst us.

The ministry of spiritual direction invites people into safe, contemplative conversation where the focus is to develop discerning awareness of grace in daily life. As we listen for the grace of God with us in our living, spiritual direction assumes that grace can be embodied in human experience and that the stories people bring to spiritual direction may indeed be stories of encountering God’s grace. As this thesis has explored, however, the discipline of theology observes the need to ask the prior questions: Can God’s grace be experienced? What is God’s grace? Can there be an embodied experience of grace? And, How is an experience of maternal embrace an embodied experience of grace?

Some caution is rightly called for when claiming an embodied experience of grace. As discussed in chapter one, it is problematic to state that one is experiencing God. We can, however, describe an embodied experience of grace. Human beings can become aware of God’s grace only through encounter and reflection on experience. Experience of grace refers to conscious awareness of God’s self-revealing.

Unless one has a sense of the nearness of God, the overwhelming sense of the way God pervades and permeates our very being, one will not find religious images significant: the power of the images for God of father, mother, lover, friend will not be appreciated. 205

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205 McFague, p. 2.
It is important also to be aware that grace is not an abstract concept. In relationship with God, Rahner says human beings are ‘endowed with grace.’ Grace is not simply a moral help or an encounter with an external force. Grace is what God offers humanity and what human beings experience in relationship with God. Grace is interwoven with Christian anthropology. Before grace is spoken about, grace is experienced. Speaking of God as relational and intimately involved in the ongoing life of creation, we claim God as not only hidden, but also revealed in the Christ event. God is not only transcendent, but also an incarnate presence in the world: in creation, in the body of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Grace is not, as modern western individualism would suggest, an event in the human mind. Grace begins with God, as divine subject, and can become an embodied encounter in human experience.

Divine self-communication means … that God can communicate himself in his own reality to what is not divine without ceasing to be infinite reality and absolute mystery, and without man ceasing to be a finite existent different from God.

Discussion of embodiment draws on an embodied Christian anthropology: reclaiming from dualistic separations of body and mind an integrated embodied human self-understanding. Reflection on the Incarnation also reclaims the Godliness of the body as part of Creation. A theology can be developed which does not limit God as a separate being who only encounters us somehow from beyond ourselves, but God also, as Paul reminds us, dwells within the holy temples of our human bodies (1 Cor. 6: 19). Embodied human beings experience life and God’s grace in and through our physicality.

God, who blesses us with the gift of life, is revealed to us in Jesus Christ and sustains us by the Holy Spirit. In the midst of daily life, God is present and seeking intimate relationship with humanity. The maternal embrace provides an articulated metaphor for the embodied experience of grace. This thesis explored a lived experience of maternal embrace that I

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206 Rahner “Grace”, in Sacramentum Mundi, p. 422
described as being an encounter with grace. By applying tools of discernment to test my example I discovered signs of the fruits of the Spirit and suggested that this *maternal embrace* may well have facilitated awareness of a graced moment.

This study of *maternal embrace* confirms it as a rich metaphor for the embodied experience of grace. *Maternal embrace* offers the nurturing, enabling and enduring embrace reflected in the Christian scriptures, theology and traditions, and the human encounter with the grace of God.


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Appendix

Raphael's, *Tempi Madonna*[^208]  
*Sleeping Child*[^209]

Bellini, *Madonna Enthroned Adoring the Sleeping Child*


Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna degli Alberetti* ²¹⁰

Bellini, *Pietà* ²¹¹

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²¹⁰ Bellini, *Madonna Enthroned Adoring the Sleeping Child*, 1475, Tempera on wood, 120 x 65 cm., Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice. 
http://www.galleryofart.us/Giovanni_Bellini/Madonna+Enthroned+Adoring+the+Sleeping+Child.jpg.html

²¹¹ Bellini, *Pietà*, 1505, Oil on wood, 65 x 90 cm., Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, 