

SENSUOUS SPIRITUALITY

Out From Fundamentalism

REVISED & EXPANDED



Virginia Ramey
Mollenkott



Dedicated to
J. Suzannah Tilton
and
Debra L. Morrison
and
in loving memory
of my dear mother
May Lotz Ramey
(1902–1989)
and my equally dear father
Robert Franklin Ramey
(1903–2003)

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Comments on the first edition of Sensuous Spirituality

"Sensuous Spirituality is a courageous and intelligent book, full of theological freshness and wise insight! Out of her quest to teach the truths proven by her own experience, Virginia Mollenkott offers a ringing challenge for women and men who long to integrate authentic spirituality with a passion for justice. Mystics should read it for practical instruction in bringing about a liberated human community; and activists, for its confident assurance of the Christ within. All who read it will find themselves enlivened by a new vision of cosmic wholeness."

— Gail Anderson Ricciuti
coauthor of Birthings and Blessings:
Liberating Worship Services for the
Inclusive Church

"I have always found Virginia one of the most irenic and spiritually reconciling voices in the feminist movement. I was aware that Virginia sought prayerfully to speak and write out of a spiritual center where she was deeply in harmony with Wisdom, the Spirit of God. That peaceful and joyous spiritual voice has reached a wonderful richness and maturity in this book. Virginia shares with us the deepest secrets of her striving to be one with the Spirit. The chapters dealing with reconciliation and forgiving one's enemy will, I believe, become spiritual classics.

"Even where I find myself in disagreement with Virginia (as I do to some extent in the discussion of abortion), I find her fairness and openness to dialogue and obvious effort to put herself in the shoes of her adversary provide the ideal context for mutual understanding and the real openness of mind necessary for the Spirit of Wisdom to resolve antagonisms and open hearts."

John J. McNeill

 author of Taking a Chance on God:
 Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians and
 Their Lovers, Families and Friends

"For those whose concern with the Human takes precedence over gender, race, and creed, careful study of this immensely erudite and passionate plea for the full integration of our lesbian, gay, and bisexual fellow humans in our consistently 'hetero-patriarchal' culture is mandatory. It is indeed 'sensuous and passionate.'

— Frederick Franck, author of To Be Human against All Odds

"This wonderfully readable and challenging book reaches across the chasms that divide people of faith over issues that cluster around sexual matters. Always seeking to bridge passionate divisions so as to enable persons to be 'generous' to those who differ, Dr. Mollenkott models her teaching that 'people create social change by being the social change they are looking for.'

"Alive with fresh images (bridges and brakes, angels and dancing gazelles, needlepoint and moths), this book reads like a good conversation with a wise and deeply spiritual woman. Dr. Mollenkott is both! Her straightforward Christian convictions are based on the authority of Scripture, her wideranging literary background, and her own faith journey - all of which she shares in a very personal way.

"I know of no one else who can speak as persuasively and sensitively to evangelical persons about sexism, patriarchy, heterosexism, pro-choice decisions, sexual abuse, divorce, homosexuality, inclusive God language, and the host of other critical issues for Christians that cluster around sexual matters. But she is equally challenging to persons who share her point of view - but who may be without the grace-filled generosity of spirit and love for the Scriptures that are embodied in the author's faith expression."

> - Jeanne Audrey Powers General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns The United Methodist Church

PREFACE TO THE 2008 EDITION



Some years ago I had the privilege of lecturing at a gathering of Anglican university students from all over Canada and the United States. The worship leader at that gathering was Desmond Tutu, at that time still a bishop in a South Africa ruled by apartheid. For a few moments that I have always treasured, I was alone backstage with Bishop Tutu. I asked him how he managed to remain so cheerful when it seemed as if the racist injustices of apartheid would never end. He immediately threw the question back to me: "How do you, a lesbian, remain cheerful in the face of your country's heterosexism and homophobia?" That was something I had often thought about, so I replied with confidence: "Well, I remind myself that I am an actor in a Divine Comedy. I may not be on stage when the final curtain rings down, but my job is to perform my part as directed, sure that the ending will be a happy one." Bishop Tutu smiled his delightful smile: "Yes, I know, and that's exactly how I feel also."

Since that conversation, apartheid has ended; Bishop Tutu has become an archbishop, has played a major role in the South African reconciliation movement, and has retired. I too have retired long since, but I still live in a society that denies me first-class citizenship. Even in relatively progressive New Jersey, where I live, I can currently have a civil union but not the dignity and respect accorded to marriage. So American gender/sexual apartheid has not yet collapsed. Nevertheless, I have cherished that interaction with Bishop Tutu and its South African aftermath as a signal of shining hope.

I tell that story here as an example of what I mean by the title of this book, "sensuous spirituality." This is a book about living consciously and responsibly as a citizen of this world, actively experiencing the "onstage" human condition in every cell of our gendered and sexual bodies, struggling for justice yet enjoying as much happiness as possible—and

at the same time remaining aware of a backstage unseen reality, a spiritual dimension that did not begin with us and will not end when our on-stage roles are finished. We do not regard spirituality as something that absolves us of concern for the bodily well-being of these who share the age with us, nor do we regard sexual pleasure as the enemy of spirit. Rather, we seek to live our everyday lives in a spirited way, to perform our gender in a spirited fashion, and to socialize our children and grand-children to live both sensuously and spiritually without imagining that there is any necessary conflict between them. If you agree with the values that I have just described and would like to wrestle with some of the issues that challenge such a perspective, then you are one of the people for whom I have written this book.

And rewritten it. Since 1992 when the first edition was published, and 1991 and earlier when it was being written, the movement for gay and lesbian liberation has made great strides. Some bisexuals have bravely identified themselves, and above all the transgender community has coalesced and become a major factor to be reckoned with. Scholarly books and articles have poured off the presses concerning gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. Brilliant work has described the many "queer" aspects of Scripture that had formerly been overlooked, as well as the difficulties of interpreting a text as complex as the Bible. Religious communities have been dragging their feet, but even so, some gendersexual progress has been achieved - for example, the Episcopal Church U.S.A., with its female presiding bishop and its openly gay bishop. Personally, I have researched, written, and revised a book called Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach (2001; revised, 2007), and, with a cross-dresser named Vanessa Sheridan, I have coauthored Transgender Journeys (2003). So it has become time for a massive revision of this book.

Every chapter has been updated to reflect new insights and newly available evidence, especially concerning the complex gender/sexual continuum that reflects reality so much more truthfully than our society's male-female polarization. I have written from a Christian humanist perspective because I believe that we speak most authentically when we speak from our own personal experience (H. Hunt, xxv). But I have learned a great deal from other religious traditions; I honor them in my heart, and I welcome responses from readers who could enlighten me concerning any aspects of their traditions that I should have lifted up.

Despite the many changes that I have made, there remain some explanations from the 1992 edition that I need to reiterate here.

PREFACE TO THE 1992 EDITION

Some Essential Explanations and Acknowledgments



Explanation One: Regarding Pronouns

In this book I am going to use the "generic feminine" pronouns *she* and *her*, a usage I hasten to acknowledge as a tongue-in-cheek feminist invention. Since it is men who usually consider language issues trivial and women who usually consider them important, syndicated columnist Gena Corea once suggested, and I agree, that we "use a pronoun that pleases women. Men don't care what it is as long as it's not clumsy so, from now on, let's use 'she' to refer to the standard human being. The word 'she' includes 'he' so that would be fair. Anyway, we've used 'he' for the past several thousand years and we'll use 'she' for the next few thousand; we're just taking turns" (quoted in Miller and Swift, 33). Although I usually use genuinely inclusive language, I am so tired of grassroots resistance to it that I am trying the "generic she" as a refreshing alternative to traditional usage.

Why not? In the first place, we feminists are often accused of lacking a sense of humor. So by using the "generic she" in the midst of a heteropatriarchal society in which man is still considered by many people to be generic and normative, I am both proving that I have a sense of humor and providing my readers with an opportunity to exercise theirs. In the second place, anyone whose vision is intact can see that not only does the word she visually include the word he, but also the word her visually includes the word he. Therefore, the "generic feminine" pronoun in English is inclusive in a way that the "generic masculine" never was. In

the third place, that distinguished reference work called the Oxford English Dictionary has no entry for a generic use of he, but it does explain that they is "often used in reference to a singular noun made universal by every, any, no, etc. or applicable to one of either sex." The closest that the Oxford English Dictionary gets to a "generic he" is the use of he concerning "things not sexually distinguished"; and surely nobody would wish to argue that conventional males and females are "not sexually distinguished"! In the fourth place, to the best of my knowledge, rules about using he generically to mean both men and women were invented by a single male grammarian in the eighteenth century. If he could make up rules that had the effect of constituting maleness as the linguistic standard for being human, why can't women make up different rules that move femaleness into the linguistic center?

In the fifth and final place, if readers do not like my "generic feminine" pronouns, I will happily settle for genuinely inclusive language in the future. As Alma Graham has written, "If you have a group half of whose members are A's and half of whose members are B's and if you call the group C, then A's and B's may be equal members of group C. But if you call the group A, there is no way that B's can be equal to A's within it. The A's will always be the rule and the B's will always be the exception — the subgroup, the subspecies, the outsiders" (quoted in Miller and Swift, 32). Most publications now use inclusive language, which calls the human group C, except for God-language, which remains predominantly masculine and therefore perpetuates the normativeness of group A (the male group). But the language of many people's daily conversation has continued to refer to group A as both the name of the male half of the human group and the name of the whole group, making the female members (group B) into a subspecies of outsiders. In this book I am reversing the process, using B pronouns to refer both to the female half of the human group and to the human group as a whole. If anyone objects, wonderful - I'll be happy to settle for "group C" pronouns forever afterward. In the English language viewed historically, that would mean using they not only as a plural pronoun but also as a singular pronoun applicable to a traditional person of either gender/sex or any intermediate gender/sex. Is anybody ready to defy that eighteenth-century grammarian and switch their allegiance from "generic he and his" or "generic she and hers" to the genuinely generic precedent "generic they and theirs"? I hope that by the end of this book we'll all be ready for "group C" pronouns!

Explanation Two: Regarding God-Language

If my third-person singular pronouns are an attempt to give group A an opportunity to feel how it is to be subsumed under group B, and to give group B an opportunity to feel standard and normative at least for the duration of this book, in my God-language I am attempting balance of another sort. I believe that there is One Ultimate Interrelational Being who undergirds all personhood and relationships, One Consciousness that flows through all consciousness, One Love that is unconditional and embraces everything that lives (and everything does live). My name for this Cosmic Energy or Consciousness is God. I do not use the word Goddess because in our social context that word implies the presence of a second All-Encompassing Being - surely a contradiction in terms and logic. In a human race constituted mostly of males and females with a variety of degrees and in-between transgenderists, the term God ought to imply the presence of a Goddess-component just as strongly as the term Goddess implies the presence of a God-component; but after centuries of heteropatriarchal emphasis on male separateness, autonomy, and individualism, it simply doesn't.

However, I firmly believe (and will argue in chapters 5 and 6) that exclusively masculine God-language has created a serious imbalance in human society, causing ego-inflation in too many men, self-abnegation in too many women, and the erasure of divinity in all the in-betweens. Although the dictionary does not assign a gender to the term God, which usually is defined simply as "the supreme or ultimate reality," centuries of using exclusively masculine pronouns concerning God have established the word as masculine-gender in all but the most sophisticated theological minds. The predominance of masculine God-imagery such as King, Master, Warrior, and Father has of course intensified the androcentric connotations of the term God.

Therefore, in order to restore a balance that will be healthier for human relationships, I have chosen to use capitalized feminine pronouns concerning God. It is my hope that by referring to God as *She*, the androcentricity of the term *God* will be offset and balanced by the gynocentricity of the capitalized feminine pronouns. To refer to *God Herself* seems to me a humanly just way of referring to the One who is neither male nor female nor in-between, and yet all-inclusively male and female and in-between.

Explanation Three: Regarding My Sense of Primary Accountability

In her book Speaking of Christ, Carter Heyward explains her subtitle, which is A Lesbian Feminist Voice:

At this moment in United States history, a largely reactionary church and state as well as progressive movements are attempting to keep lesbians and gay men in the closet and to mute the radical implications of genuinely feminist voices. In this context, it is critical that we who can (we who have access to publishers, for example) simply speak the words, "I am lesbian. I am feminist." The words I speak — whether about grocery shopping, Anglican spirituality, sex, or Christ — are lesbian feminist words because I speak them. (Heyward, *Speaking*, 11)

Like Carter Heyward, I speak and always have spoken in a lesbian voice; the feminism came much later than the lesbianism, signs of which were apparent in me by the age of four. Although I have come to identify myself essentially as a spiritual being who is currently having embodied human experiences, those experiences have been authentically lesbian for as long as I can remember. (My heterosexual marriage was the attempt of a brainwashed fundamentalist to fit herself into the heteropatriarchal mold. I enjoyed motherhood, and I enjoyed respectability; but they were all that I enjoyed.)

The first time I was empowered by Carter Heyward was when, inspired by her example, I added heterosexism to my list of sinful -isms when I was preaching. I half expected the church walls to crash in upon me when I pronounced the word, but I felt encouraged when they stood firm. Carter has inspired and empowered me many times since: it was her coinage Godding, for instance, that became the title of one of my books. It had become so integral to my own thinking when I wrote the book that I forgot where I had heard the word; but having reread Carter's work, I gladly acknowledge that debt. And now Carter challenges me to "signal for the reader my sense of primary accountability" (Heyward, Speaking, 10). So, Carter, I do just that: I am lesbian. I am feminist. As a woman with a strong "masculine component," I am transgender. And my special people are feminist lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, and transgender people. My primary communities of accountability are the community of trans-

les-bi-gay people,¹ the feminist and womanist communities, and, to one degree or another, liberation communities everywhere.

Explanation Four: Regarding the Current Social System

Throughout this book I refer to the structure of society as hetero-patriarchy. That's a mouthful; but it's worth naming accurately, I think. Readers of feminist literature will be accustomed to the word patriarchy, referring to the hierarchical ways of organizing by which everything and everyone is ranked and whatever is male and white tends to get the upper hand. People and things cannot simply be different from one another: one way of being, doing, and thinking must always be the norm, everything else being ab-normal. So white skin is superior to skin of other colors, men are superior to women, the rich are superior to the poor, youth is better than age, thin is better than fat, straight is better than gay, reason is better than passion, and so forth. And of course the "superior" are often ready to use force to maintain their "superiority." Patriarchy is a profoundly mistaken social system that has caused misery to millions and could yet cause the destruction of humankind and the planet we share together.

But why heteropatriarchy? Because male supremacy is maintained by teaching young women that their destiny is to meet the needs of men and by teaching young men that their masculinity depends on gaining and maintaining control over women. Compulsory heterosexuality is the very backbone that holds patriarchy together. And it seems to me important that the backbone be named prominently and repeatedly. If ever society is to turn from patriarchy to partnership, we must learn that transgender, lesbian, bisexual, and gay issues are not just private bedroom matters of "doing and being whatever turns you on." They are wedges driven into the superstructure of the heteropatriarchal system. That is the reason for the rage at the trans-les-bi-gay community's increasingly public presence. Most Americans will tolerate differences as long as they are kept shamefacedly secret. But the American right wing senses that a widespread revolt against compulsory heterosexuality and

^{1. &}quot;Trans-les-bi-gay people" is verbal shorthand for "transgender people, lesbian women, bisexual people, and gay men," which gets a little weighty after a while. I refuse to say "transgenders, lesbians, bisexuals, and gays," just as I refuse to speak of "cripples" or "Jews" or "the retarded" or "Mexicans" or any other label without adding the words that indicate that people are, first and foremost, people.

the binary gender construct would bring about the downfall of heteropatriarchy. I agree, at least to the degree that overcoming heterosexism and transphobia would be a major step in the direction of pluralism and the acceptance of difference, and therefore of greater human health.

Explanation Five: Regarding Documentation

Instead of providing footnotes or endnotes for my quotations and citations of the works of others, I am using a system that seems to me simpler and easier than traditional footnoting. At the back of this book I have provided a list of all works quoted from or cited in my text. In the text itself I have placed the last name of the author in a parenthesis immediately following any quotation or concept drawn from her work, usually with the relevant page number, but just the author's name if the reference is to a book or essay as a whole. All that the interested reader needs to do to get full documentation is to flip to the alphabetical list in Works Cited. In those instances where I have utilized more than one work by a single author, the parenthesis contains an abbreviated title as well as the author's surname — for example, (Heyward, *Speaking*, 10). I have used footnotes only to give important information that would otherwise disturb the flow of my prose.

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I thank my mother for clinging to life until I could get to her deathbed, so that I could be present at the moment of her homegoing; and I deeply

appreciate the several assurances she has since given me that she has "never felt better in her life." The strength of our ongoing relationship flows through this book. I was not with my dad when he made his transition to the larger life, but he has since assured me that his love surrounds me. I am grateful for his strong fatherly energy.

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I thank Wanda and Richard Lollar for proving to me by their lives that it is possible for heterosexual fundamentalist people to become inclusive in response to new information and the love of God. And thanks to all the other dear people who light up my life, especially my beloved son, Paul Mollenkott; his partner, Barbara Yodice Mollenkott; and my amazing grandgirls, Miranda, Sarina, and Corrine. I am grateful for my only sibling, who has asked not to be mentioned in my work but who nevertheless is one of my best teachers on this earthly plane, providing me with ample opportunities to learn forgiveness. I thank God for the Tilton family; the Morrison family; Nancy, Paul, and Joshua Bakalar; Letha Dawson Scanzoni, Anne Eggebroten, and my other "sisters of summer" in the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus; the Christian People of the Rainbow and my dear sisters who gather for Sisterly Conversations each year at Kirkridge, as well as Carolyn McDade and the circle of women who sing with her. I gratefully treasure memories of family who have recently moved over to the Other Side: Ruth and George Canning, Marilyn Mollenkott, Julia and John Tilton, and my dear brother-in-love, John Gerwig Tilton Jr.

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Above all, I thank the angels who always hover near and the Depth that has called to my depths throughout this writing and rewriting.

CONTENTS



Preface to the 2008 Edition	vii
Preface to the 1992 Edition	ix
1. The Heart of the Matter	1
2. A Tale of Two Handmaids	18
3. Midwifing Justice as the Wisdom of God Herself	32
4. Biblical Support for Honoring Human Diversity	50
5. Femininity, Masculinity, Transgender, and Human Fulfillment	69
6. Sex/Gender Constructs and the Human Imaging of God	89
7. Eros Is a Spiritual Urge	107
8. The Sex-Love-Justice Connection in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures	122
9. Some Beatitudes for Today's Church: Toward Becoming More Functional Church "Families"	143
10. Procreative Self-Direction and a More Just Society	159
11. The Transgender, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Community as Social Transformer	177
12. Building Bridges between Interpretive Communities	197
Appendix A: Milton's Use of the Bible to Defend Divorce for Incompatibility	225
Appendix B: Diverse Forms of Family Mentioned or Implied in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures	231
Works Cited	235
Index	249

ONE

THE HEART OF THE MATTER



When I was young, I memorized a lot of Scripture, all from the venerable King James Version of 1611. One of the passages I memorized was Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" I now understand passages like that to be talking about the human ego-nature that imagines itself separate from God and separate from all other creatures, as opposed to the eternal and holy Self that is the human essence. In other words, I now understand that such passages refer to what the apostle Paul called "flesh" (sarx): "the state of illusion in which the natural, fallen [human being] found [herself] believing that [she] had [her] life at [her] own disposal, that [she] could live out of [her] own resources, that [she] was not utterly and wholly dependent upon God" (Cole, 95). Paul contrasted "flesh" with "spirit" (pneuma), the sense of connectedness with God that is at the human core. But that is not what I was taught during my early years. Instead, I was given to understand that passages about the ego or "flesh" were descriptions of my deepest, most essential being, the very core of my personhood, which could be redeemed and controlled only by the installation of a totally other Christ-nature (a pacemaker of the soul).

Consequently, I was suspicious of any psychologists or theologians who spoke of the goodness and beauty of the human core, "the dearest freshness deep down things" that Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins rejoiced in. No matter how much distortion has been produced in the personality because of its response to threats and traumas, as several psychologists had pointed out to me, underneath all the damage lies hidden a beautiful Self. I desperately wanted to believe them, but I was blocked by the interpretation of the Bible that I had been taught. And of course, at the time I was confusing a relatively recent and authoritarian interpretation with a more flexible and liberating approach to the Bible.

So how does a fundamentalist who believes that she is essentially and totally depraved become transformed into a person who knows that she is an innocent spiritual being who is temporarily having human experiences? The answer is: through a long and gradual process involving the study of hermeneutics; a great deal of dreaming and learning to interpret those dreams; extensive journaling; psychological use of the *I Ching* and the Tarot to learn something about the movement of my unconscious mind; agonizing struggles with *A Course in Miracles*; studying the works of Paul Norman Tuttle, Robert Perry, and Alan Watson; reading up on the hermetic tradition and on spiritual healing; much pondering of great theological poets such as John Milton and Emily Dickinson; listening to and reading outstanding thinkers among my contemporaries; learning how to love and be loved; the experience of my mother's death and thereafter our continued closeness; here and there, some psychotherapy; and some mildly mystical experiences.

Inasmuch as I still sometimes revert to the judgmentalism and divisiveness of a human ego that is on its own in a hostile world, the process continues. But there was for me one distinct "holy instant" when my basic perception of myself flipped into a different mode. Prior to that "holy instant," I had inched my way from believing myself to be totally depraved (although redeemed by God's grace) to believing myself to be a basically decent human being who was having some lovely spiritual experiences. But one day while I was meditating, I experienced a reality that was even better than that: like my Elder Brother, Jesus, I am a sinless Self traveling through eternity and temporarily having human experiences in a body known as Virginia Ramey Mollenkott.

What is ultimately real about me, I realized, is the Consciousness that is currently within my body but even now is not limited to my body, since I can in my mind visit England or Japan in an instant. My body is not unimportant; it is in fact very important as the colleague of my soul. But its limitations are not my Self's limitations, for my Self is a consciousness within the all-embracing Consciousness I call by the name of God. Her consciousness is in mine, and mine in Hers, in a communion that people sometimes feel when we are with a close friend and both of us get the same idea at the same moment.

^{1.} The term *holy instant* comes from the three-volume set *A Course in Miracles* (see Works Cited for publishing information). References to "the holy instant" occur in the *Text* volume, pp. 282, 288, 289, 290–93, 297–98, 300, 302, 305, 324–25, 335, 337, 340, 345, 354–55, 357–58, 362, 366, 369, 378, 419, 533–35.