

Introduction

It is now two decades since the first studies in religion departments were established in a small number of Australian tertiary institutions. Of necessity, the emphasis was on traditions of analysis and critique developed in England, Europe and the United States, and as very few women were appointed in the new departments, there was no forum for the type of feminist analysis that was developing in major overseas universities and theological schools.

Right from the beginning of the most recent women's movement in Australia, women in Christianity pioneered protest and lobby groups, founding *Magdalen*, a journal-magazine expressing women's concerns and opening the door to new writing in feminist theology and to Christian activist movements both inside and outside Australia. In Erin White's words, this energy came "from the grass roots, mainly from women objecting to their exclusion from Christian churches and fighting for the reform of these churches, and from those seeking to establish some independent forums for women's spirituality on the fringe of or beyond church structures".¹ The more recently founded publication *Women-Church* reflects the same influences with a theoretical base which resonates with contemporary philosophy and theology. But these developments, with few exceptions, were marginalised by mainstream gender studies and feminist scholarship, which reflected the brashly secular emphasis in Australian educational institutions in which strong intellectual traditions of positivism, empiricism, Marxism and radical individualism were very influential.

Women activists also found themselves marginalised in religious studies academic circles. Although women, especially school teachers and "casual" scholars outside the universities, made up a good proportion of the mem-

bership at the founding of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions in the mid-1970s, they were in general unable to contribute unless mentored by male academics in the mainstream traditions of scholarship. Women trained in history of religions or theology, or as specialists in religion within other disciplines were very few.

The crisis point for Australian women scholars in studies in religion came in 1985, when the International Association for the History of Religions Quinquennial Congress was held in Australia. What was a rite of passage and entry to international networks for many Australian male scholars meant something very different to those women who wished to identify with specifically gender issues even on the most basic terms. It is in the events of this Congress that this volume of papers has its genesis. In a surprise move, a formally submitted panel on gender was banned and deleted from the official program by the Congress Executive, without reference to the AASR.² The panel was held successfully outside the auspices of the Congress and a Women's Caucus founded within the Australian Association for the Study of Religions in 1986, followed the next year by the first AASR conference section on women and religion.

In the intervening years, Australian women's scholarship in studies in religion and related disciplines has gathered momentum. After intensive lobbying by Professor Ursula King of Bristol University, the 1990 IAHR Congress held in Rome included a panel on gender in which a small number of Australian women took part.³ North American readers will be reminded of similar experiences, but also of the conspicuous success of the Women's Caucus of the American Academy of Religion. It is still the case that there is little support for gender studies in religion in Australian universities. We believe that this situation will change when it is understood that lack of knowledge of, and attention to, feminist scholarship is the mark of ignorance in the field rather than the self-congratulatory avoidance of fringe activities which bring it into "disrepute"!

Feminist studies in religion in many ways reflect the developments that have occurred in the general area of women's studies. The earliest work developed in terms of a critique of the patriarchal structures which have informed most scholarship. These studies demonstrated that women have been either forgotten, elided or simply denigrated. With few exceptions, they were not considered fitting subjects of research, nor was the idea ever entertained that women themselves could undertake an investigation into their own history of omission or oppression.

The first phase of feminist work, then, sought to redress this imbalance. This has been described as striving "to restore women to history and to restore our history to women".⁴ Work of this genre seeks to locate and define women's place in the scheme of things from an historical and textual perspective. At the same time, it is critical of both the rubrics of scholarship and other vested interests (e.g., ecclesiastical) that deny or explain away these endeavours as trivial.

The second phase in the development of feminist studies is more complex. It is here that women attempt to define what could be called the feminist space of knowing. This work is of a more abstract nature, but it attempts to maintain as its guide the nature of women's experience. Such work has two distinct yet interrelated components. One is that of critique, the other is that of construct. What this entails is that women challenge prevailing models and terminology of knowledge that reflect the hegemony of male concerns and representations. So it is that in Christianity, women will challenge traditional concepts of God, church, ministry, eschatology, womanhood, etc., in theology, as well as the postulates of knowledge itself in philosophy. Given their awareness, however, of the contextual nature of all knowledge and the fragility of metaphysical "absolutes", women scholars know that it is impossible to formulate alternative structures of knowledge without including the speaker's/writer's position as part of the possibility and limits of knowing. This is where both a healthy dose of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"⁵ and an expanded awareness of the nature of both text and context are necessary.

Thus, in a self-reflexive movement, feminist scholars need to be as critical of their own constructs as they have been of the paradigms of the patriarchal mindset. On the one hand, they wish to avoid replication of the same dualistically based exclusions that the male-identified models of knowledge, implicit in much philosophy and theology, have effected. Yet they are also conscious that a women's perspective, while it may bring new insights, does not usher in a bright new dawn of knowledge, innocent and independent of our intellectual heritage. They are aware of the complicitous nature of any critique, and that it is not possible (nor perhaps desirable) to extricate oneself completely from the given conditions of knowledge.

So it is that in striving to name women's space, and to contest the hierarchy of gender-based relations (as they are evident in both theory and practice), feminist scholars are constantly suspicious of the grounds on which they base their claims. Knowledge thus comes to be appreciated as contextualised, provisional, and always open to further critique. It is because of this refusal to absolutise that, through trial and error and the representations of women from distinct backgrounds of "race", class, age, religion and gender-affiliation, the multifaceted nature of women's studies has become apparent and is one of the marks of feminist scholarship. It is with these discernments, then, that different women scholars take their stand in presenting their cases, reflecting the diverse perspectives that express the commitments and needs of women.

In bringing together the papers in this volume (most of which were written specifically for it), the editors have drawn on recent traditions of Australian women's scholarship, especially those developed within AASR conference sections. We chose not to confine scholars to a theme other than the implications of the title. Most of those working in the area of gender and religion tend to be lone figures in religious studies, anthropology or sociol-

ogy departments, or in theological colleges. Our work thus reflects the particular contexts of various disciplines as we strive to carve out an appropriate and supportive intellectual (and physical) space. Our ritual space is less than formal for most of us; some of us participate in ritual to which we were not initially acculturated; all of us rely on the rituals of mutual support and close communication.

Nor are the papers included intended as an exhaustive survey of the variety and scope of religious thought and practice in Australia.⁶ Although claiming our rites involves us in the contestation of mainstream categories, constructions and methodologies in our fields, there is not evident in this collection, nor did we require or expect, any particular theoretical approach or feminist ideology. What seemed most germane was that each of the contributors was working self-consciously and critically *as* a woman in a field where it has been assumed that gender is a neutral, not male-identified, term. Questions of distinction and difference, of absolute and particular, as well as the concomitant models of epistemology and ethics, are the key concerns of contemporary theory. They are explored in various guises in all the papers in this volume, even when not specifically addressed.

As a whole, this collection represents the widest view at present possible of Australian women's work in religious studies. Papers are grouped in several areas or disciplines in which the interests of Australian women seem to be strongest and where the divisions mirror the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies and the various approaches and methods associated with the field. The sections are: Myth and Text; Philosophy, Theology and Feminist Theory; and the Social Sciences.

Part I: Myth and text as oral, iconic and written narrative are the foundational data of human history and philosophy and all the papers in this volume bring to mind this data, even if implicitly. We begin this collection with the examination of four very different kinds of texts, beginning with Intertestamental Hebrew literature. **Anne Gardner** decodes, with a discriminating eye, the text of the book of *Susannah*. In her skilful exegesis, Gardner links *Susannah* intertextually to the lily (*shoshannah*) among thorns of the Song of Songs. The thorns, in this case, are identified with the elders who attempt to seduce Susannah, then falsely accuse her of adultery. Gardner views *Susannah* as a vindication of Susannah's innocence and as a cautionary tale to males who would falsely accuse women, for they will receive their just desserts. This careful reading brings to our attention a rarely discussed work from the Intertestamental literature, and indicates the new insights that an informed reader with feminist eyes can bring to light.

In extensive research on the work of the Australian novelist and printmaker Barbara Hanrahan, **Elaine Lindsay** has found that, in their reading of Hanrahan's text and iconography, the literary-critical exegetes in

Australia have all but ignored Hanrahan's religious insights. Lindsay examines currently powerful spiritual metaphors in this country and finds them gendered in the context of the heroic desert pilgrimage as the ideal Australian spiritual journey. In drawing attention to Hanrahan as a mystic of the intimate detail of the art of nature and folk traditions, and to her mystical prayer as the making of art and the telling of stories, Lindsay challenges the basis of contemporary understandings of spirituality in Australia with what she calls a "theology of the settled areas which has grown out of the first-hand experiences of women".

These latter have no part in the texts examined by **Marion Maddox**. Using John Donne's metaphor of divine ravishment as the source of chastity, and emphasising the "unmarked" reading and speaking position of women worshippers, she reviews Protestant Christianity's theology of sexuality as revealed in liturgical forms and popular hymns. It should not surprise us that they contain metaphors of dominance and submission, military power and sado-masochism – all reflecting the desirability of the loss of feminine identity in the context of masculine sexual power. Maddox refuses indulgence in the shock-value of the conjunction of sexuality and religious experience, and by means of textual analysis, explores the close links between these themes and narratives of popular fiction, public entertainment and the cinema. In her ingenious exposure of the intersections of the seemingly separate discourses of "power, desire and sacredness", Maddox alerts us in a new way to the power and complexity of language in the construction of female identity and the generally unacknowledged significance of mainstream religious discourse in this process.

The final paper in this section takes us back to the foundational texts and turns our attention towards new feminist readings of the divine-human which alter considerably the experience of the reading and speaking positions of women in Christianity. **Elaine Wainwright**, in her response to the critiques of earlier masculinist Christologies, seeks to elaborate one that does not depend solely on patriarchal precedents. Building on the insights of other feminist scholars, Wainwright explores the notion of Sophia (Wisdom), particularly as exemplified in the Gospel of Matthew. She examines the lineage of Sophia in Hebrew texts and then places it in the context of Matthew's Gospel where it figures as one of the terms used to designate Christ. While not the predominant image, Jesus as the offspring of Sophia mediates her insights by appropriate activity in the world. While Wainwright concedes that this interpretation constitutes the underside of the text, she nonetheless believes such an interpretation, which suggests further resonances within an intertextual setting, has profound implications for a further transformation of the Christian myth. The vision of Jesus as Wisdom's child contains intimations of a female gestalt of God – an inherent, yet seldom discussed element in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Part II: The theological themes of the new readings of myth and text reappear in some of the papers in the second part of the book: Philosophy, Theology and Feminist Theory. **Dorothy Lee** begins her reflection on feminist hermeneutics with an exegesis of John's story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at Jacob's well, and moves towards a critique of what she sees as a tendency to overemphasise the "hermeneutics of suspicion" at the cost of positive reclamation of the text. Within the context of Christian women's spirituality, Lee draws our attention to the need to avoid the dualism of "heart" and "head"; exegesis should be enfolded in spirituality in the manner of Paul Ricoeur's concept of a "naive" reading, followed by critique, then empathy in a dialogical movement, in which coercion and authoritarianism are absent. In her argument for emphasis on reclamation, Lee re-examines the concept of God-as-father as well as the doctrine of the spirit and the figure of Sophia. She questions the dictum of "experience as truth" and, in deconstructing both patriarchal and feminist claims to truth, Lee represents the Hebrew and Christian texts as water from the well, not the well itself. In this way she opens up new possibilities for access to the texts, not only for women and men in Christianity, but perhaps for those outside Christianity who desire access to the foundational texts of a culture without the barrier of coercive readings.

Jocelyn Dunphy-Blomfield also queries some of the paths to emancipation from patriarchy; she explores an anomaly that appears inherent in the contemporary feminist agenda. In their attempt to compensate for centuries of negative treatment and status, there is an obvious reluctance on the part of women to confront the question of suffering and pain in the guise of evil. But is not this question of unmerited suffering the surd which haunts the human condition? Dunphy-Blomfield, in her search for what could be a commensurate and creative treatment of the topic by women, explores the words of women philosophers and writers as they contemplate forms of tragic experience. While she does not provide a solution to the dilemma, Dunphy-Blomfield evokes a witnessing, a respectful wisdom in the face of *pathos*, by means of poetic expression. *Pathos*, as suffering, then becomes viewed as that which we can only endure, yet can respond to in meaningful ways. This resolution may not satisfy intellectual argument, but nonetheless it provides a measure of acceptance. The implication is that feminists in their stressing of emancipation from social inequity need also to be mindful of this ultimately tragic dimension of life – which certain women have already depicted in perceptive ways.

Morny Joy undertakes to renegotiate the traditional attributions of sainthood and heresy. The distinction between the two terms has often been a nebulous one – yesterday's heretics becoming today's saints – depending on the dogmatic or venal proclivities of those in power. Heresy, however, has always had a pejorative tinge, implying that those so designated do not meet the selective specifications for salvation. Insofar as traditional models

of sanctity for women have tended to endorse stereotypical male-determined attributes of femininity, is it not time that women dabble in that excluded/exclusive domain of heresy? Such an approach does not indicate simply a turning of the tables and a celebration of the perverse. Rather, in its awareness of the postmodern emphasis on difference as the alien other (the oppressed and repressed of dominant tradition), such a feminist strategy indicates the inevitably compromised, if not arbitrary, nature of any attempt to impose absolute ideals or restrictions.

Dabbling in excluded domains can also be the business of hermeneutics. In her application of Paul Ricoeur's concepts of narrative to feminist hermeneutics, **Erin White** endeavours to detect the spaces that could be exploited for an increased awareness of gender issues, not just in textual analyses, but also in the epistemological model that sustains hermeneutics. In fact, White wishes to "feminise" the hermeneutic circle whereby the cycle comprised of increased self-awareness and a more nuanced appreciation of the text becomes a constant process of construction and critique. In this way, the tradition itself can be refigured at the same time as women reassess their on-going insights into both their experience and their innovative representations.

Construction and critique are also the themes of **Penny Magee's** analysis of the conjunction of sex/gender and the sacred, but in a very different setting: contemporary feminism in India. Against the backdrop of postcolonial critiques, she explores the history of rejection of "tradition" in the name of "modernity" and the ways in which this opposition is being brought to crisis in events which centre on women. Magee argues that, in the maelstrom of political protest by women in India and the associated struggle for adequate theorising of their experience, Indian feminism has moved beyond common unsatisfactory understandings of the relation of religious traditions to feminist "space". The discourses of sex, the secular and the sacred intersect in ways which undermine feminist ideologies of rational secularism.

Part III: The first paper in the final section of the volume is part of a new body of work which exemplifies the destabilising of the dualities of modernity/tradition and culturalism/economic and political materialism. In an extract selected from her study of Mukkuvar women, **Kalpna Ram** moves deftly away from the depiction of tradition and culture as static entities constraining individuals from "outside". She discovers in tradition a dynamism usually ascribed to the modern, and carefully teases out the ways in which women create the space in which to contest cultural meaning within and between two religious traditions: Catholicism and Hinduism. Oppositions fly apart and coalesce in Ram's analysis of discourses of the divine and of the demonic, intimately interpreted in the discourse of the female body. Framed in contestation of the power of the male priesthoods of both religions, these Indian women's ritual lives shimmer with the creativity of resistance.

The power of Indian women's agency is akin to that of other cultures. **Diane Bell** vibrantly demonstrates a communal ritual that sustains the spiritual connection of Australian Aboriginal women with the land. What is particularly significant in this ceremony, however, is the intimate connection of the rites of the ceremony with the rights of the land claim involved. This alignment of rites and rights serves as an exemplar of the necessary reclamation of subjectivity on the part of Aboriginal women. Such a procedure has a dual purpose; both as a repudiation of ethnographic studies that elided the spiritual responsibilities of women and as a rebuttal of the consequent dismissal of women's essential involvement in land claims. In a larger frame, such a study also represents for Bell the requisite interrelation of theory and practice in feminist research. In opposition to certain kinds of postmodern scepticism regarding subjectivity and grand narratives, Bell believes that such contextual studies as hers are a necessary element of any feminist program that intends to empower women to claim their rightful inheritance – be it in concrete realities, such as land, or in more abstract notions, such as symbolic representations.

From the perspective of social theory, **Kath McPhillips** investigates the conditions that would be conducive to the recognition and further enabling of women's agency in religion. Such a position entails a re-evaluation of the prevailing models in both sociology and theology that have consigned women to an inferior status. At the same time, Schüssler Fiorenza's construct of the *ekklesia* of women is introduced as a possible alternate form for fostering the needed emancipatory theory and practice. Inherently pluralistic, this model seeks to mediate the traditional oppositional formulas of identity and difference – not just those that in the past have subordinated women to men, but those that have more recently divided feminists by designating one idealised or universal format, to the exclusion of many women.

In contrast, the inclusion of women is **Ursula Jane O'Shea's** focus. The question of equality – both in status and in conduct – is investigated in her survey of the Quaker experience. In theory, the Quakers have represented a type of religious affiliation that honoured egalitarianism. And it would seem that its founders were sufficiently prescient of the ways of patriarchy to appreciate the need for separate women's groups to maintain the balance of separate and equal spheres. Yet O'Shea's subtle study of power dynamics illustrates how, from the very start, this precarious equilibrium was endangered. In fact, the founding myth has been used as a screen for a gradual erosion of awareness as to what equality actually entails in contemporary society. Consequently, as O'Shea depicts the situation, many Quaker women were taken by surprise by the challenges to ingrained sexism on the part of contemporary feminists. As a result, O'Shea questions both the source and the impetus for the basis of an inclusive church – if a movement so committed to equality as Quakerism from its beginnings could be so compromised. For O'Shea, any agenda for justice must be grounded spiritually and

theologically (not just ideologically) in a radical and disturbing economy of equality that is a divine mandate.

Julie Marcus also issues a challenge: her detailed study of Islamic women in Turkey continually undermines Western clichés, especially those which imply an absolute “world of difference” between Turkish women (oppressed) and Western women (free and autonomous). We have selected Marcus’ chapter on women’s rites, in which she draws our attention to the inadequacy of theory in terms both of women’s power and women’s subordination. In studying women’s ritual, Marcus looked specifically for a women’s worldview; instead of finding it “additional” to the dominant male worldview, she finds the latter contested in crucial areas, precisely those where the male worldview establishes its dominance: the meaning of birth in terms of pollution and purity, and canonical law relating to the pollution of death. The reader is enabled to enter with the author the world of the most central household ritual, a women’s reading of the household *mevlüt* commemoration of the dead. In her analysis, Marcus points out the open and egalitarian nature of the ritual and the dominant theme of female transcendence. Similarly, pilgrimage to women’s shrines affirms their ritual independence in a distinctly female worldview which runs counter to that of the mosque, not as a subordinate “sub-culture”, but as part of a firm set of values which enable a psychological independence and the kind of assertiveness not available to many Western women.

Santi Rozario also writes about Islamic women, but in the context of an intermingling of Islam, Hinduism and Christianity in Bangladesh. From her monograph, we have selected her chapter on *parda* (seclusion) and its implications for the interpretation of female sexuality. Rozario centres her chapter on a very useful review of the literature on sexuality relevant to the concerns of her enquiry, focusing on the concepts of honour, shame, purity/pollution and women’s seclusion in five different cultures. Discussion of these sources is interwoven with comparative references to Bangladeshi women in the village of Doria, who share many cultural understandings across the very different religious traditions. She concludes that in all these groups, concern about female sexual purity is the crucial factor in the subordination of women, although interpretations and practices differ according to context, including economic and political circumstances.

Politics and economics are also very relevant in the circumstances of the deprivation of rights to land which provide the context of **Deborah Bird Rose’s** impassioned recognition of the powerful and life-affirming femaleness of Australian Aboriginal women. Carrying information, but not “knowledge” of the story of the Black-headed Python woman, whose presence belonged in an area relevant to a land claim, Bird Rose set out in the company of lawyers and elders on what seemed at first a very practical, “working” journey. It ends in a revelation for both Bird Rose and her Aboriginal companion, and Bird Rose is brought to a recognition of the sacredness of her own flesh *as* the sacredness of

the spirit. In her analysis of the gendered nature of the land and space in Aboriginal cultures, Bird Rose makes clear the non-idealised nature of Dreaming Law, which treats of the world "as it is", as unsatisfactory and capable of wounding, but also with the potential for creativity and the power to heal. The present context of Aboriginal women's lives is that of being caught in a state of "continuous colonisation" and accompanying violence of all kinds, with echoes in women's experience in every other culture. This moves Bird Rose to speak urgently of our own complicity in the denial of the sacred and "god in our flesh". Woman-as-scholar is also woman-in-the-flesh, as are all of us speaking in this volume.

Morny Joy and Penny Magee
May 1994

Notes

- 1 "A Brief Account of Gender and Religion Studies in Australia", by Erin White and Penelope Magee, in *Gender and Religion: New Perspectives*, edited by Ursula King, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming 1994.
- 2 The panel was planned as an initial public discussion between women representatives of religious traditions in Australia and feminist and other scholars in religious studies. The participants were: Aziza Abdel-Haleem, Peta Jones Palach, Jyoti Thaakar and Marie Tulip, responded to by Hester Eisenstein.
- 3 A volume of papers from this Congress panel is currently in press (see note 1, above).
- 4 Joan Kelly Gadol (1976), "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History", *Signs*, 1(4): 809.
- 5 This term derives from the work of Paul Ricoeur, who referred Nietzsche, Marx and Freud as the "masters of suspicion". See *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970: 32.
- 6 The editors were unable to commission a paper from an Australian Aboriginal scholar. Studies in religion is a peculiarly "Western" activity, and Aboriginal scholars have entirely justifiable doubts about its validity for them in terms of the intellectual hegemony exercised by academics. The failure of Australian feminism, until very recently, to allow the theoretical and practical space for Aboriginal difference and dissent is also an important factor in this omission. Add to this, the danger of the uninformed expectation that one "different" person can or should speak for all. The absence of a paper of Aboriginal authorship in this collection is itself a marker of the limits of a field dependent on conventions which constrain to the point of exclusion.