Introduction

Origins and purpose

In 1989, at the First National Australian Conference on Feminist Theology, “Towards a Feminist Theology,” one of the participants, Nora McManus, read an excerpt from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* in which Shug and Celie discuss the nature of God. The God Shug describes is not the old white man who is to be found in church, but a formless and ungendered God who lives inside everybody and who is in love with all creation.¹ The audience of over five hundred women responded with great warmth, not only to the inspired quality of McManus’s reading, but also to this female-articulated vision of God. It struck me then how strange it was that Australian women were identifying so readily with a God that was not of their culture. Surely Australian women authors had also written of God in terms that reflected Australian history, geography, culture and social experience. And yet when I read the words of women talking about God and the life of the spirit I found, for the most part, that the literary illustrations were drawn from overseas writers such as Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Ntozake Shange, and Robin Morgan. Very occasionally there might be a reference to a poem by an Australian writer such as Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood or Rosemary Dobson in order to illustrate the speaker’s point of view, but rarely would the poem be expounded upon as a religious text or its author regarded as a spiritual writer. Worse, the works of women fiction writers seemed to be quite invisible to Australian women, at least in terms of their spiritual content.

Thus was the challenge identified. My first intention was to locate and describe women’s fictional writing which might be more relevant to Australian theologians and spiritual writers than imported material. In doing this, I hoped to prove that women were not only participants in religious debates but that they also had something distinctively Australian to say on the subject.

When I came to research women’s contribution to Australian Spirituality as it is articulated in works of popular theology and cultural comment, however, I found that, apart from Veronica Brady, women’s voices were absent. After read-

ing a number of texts, I discovered that the most popular paradigm of Australian Spirituality, Desert Spirituality, had been constructed from biblical resources and from a variety of male texts and male experiences. Given the ‘male-ness’ of this paradigm, as elaborated here in Chapter 1, it seemed reasonable to ask whether Desert Spirituality resonated with women and, if so, to what extent.

Chapter 2, then, is a survey of the way in which ‘real’ women write about their religious and spiritual experiences. These non-fiction texts were chosen primarily because they were commercially published and might therefore be regarded as reasonably representative of a number of contemporary women’s views on spirituality. They were not chosen to illustrate a preconceived point of view but were scrutinized to see what they might reveal about Australian spirituality as it is practised. It is striking that none of the writers makes reference to the desert and that their ideas of God and proper behaviour are quite different from those contained within Desert Spirituality. It might be argued that this research has little to do with the way in which women fiction writers are deconstructing and reconstructing ideas about God and religion; but it does function as a control against which the representativeness of women’s spirituality as revealed in fiction can be tested. Chapter 1 is the foil against which the distinctiveness of women’s spirituality (or spiritualities) shines, while Chapter 2 brings the world as experienced by women into conversation with the fictional worlds of the following three chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 follow a similar pattern in order that respective male and female experiences of religion and views on God, the place of God, ways to God and spiritual heroes may be compared. Each chapter concludes with a brief examination of Australian men and women’s writing about religion and spirituality.

The heart of this book is to be found in Chapters 3–5. These are devoted to three contemporary writers: Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley, and Barbara Hanrahan. In each chapter I endeavour to read the writer concerned in a manner sympathetic to her interests. I have thus read Astley primarily for the perspectives she offers on theological questions, perspectives growing out of her Catholic background. Jolley is read for the picture she gives of the human condition in a society in which mainstream Christianity offers little consolation; Hanrahan for her views on the artist’s relationship and responsibility to the divine. I have also considered hitherto all-but-unnoticed religious, ethical, and spiritual elements in these authors’ fictional writings and autobiographical statements, and have ex-

2 There may be a wealth of material written on Australian women writers, but very few people are interested in their spiritual lives and writings. Typical of critical approaches to women writers is Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women’s Novels, ed. Carole Ferrier (St Lucia: UQP, 1985), where writers are portrayed as critics, political figures, migrants, investigators of family
trapolated from them some ideas about an Australian spirituality that is quite distinct from Desert Spirituality and may be regarded as typical of an Australian women's spirituality.

The design of these three chapters is similar. Each section begins with biographical material in an attempt to locate spiritually important influences on the writer under discussion and to give voice to the writer's own views on the divine. This is followed by an examination of the way in which the writer handles concepts of God and where God is found, and of Christianity and proper behaviour. Towards the end of each of these three chapters, in order to establish whether the sacred dimensions of these fictions have been recognized, I look at the way in which their authors have been read. This subsection reveals the unwillingness of people to grant women a prophetic or religious voice and relates to the observation in Chapter 1 that, of fiction writers, only men have been recognized as bearers of the sacred. The interest in this subsection lies in the nature of the reception accorded to the texts, hence its appearance towards the end of each chapter, rather than at the beginning, where it might obscure a fresh reading of the fictions as (semi-) religious texts.

In the final chapter, I attempt to sketch a composite Australian women's spirituality: that is, to identify its key components, the ways in which it differs from Desert Spirituality, and what its implications might be for white Australian Christianity and culture. I hope to prove that at least some Australian women fiction writers are seriously concerned with questions of theology and spirituality and that, although their contributions have not been recognized by theologians and cultural commentators,\(^3\) they are still exerting an influence on the way in which the public mind shapes and articulates women's spirituality, a way far removed from the dominant – or is it clichéd? – paradigm of Desert Spirituality.

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\(^3\) This lack of recognition is all the more extraordinary when one considers that, according to data collected from Christians and non-believers during the 1983 Australian Values System Study, women are more religious than men. Figures show that women are more likely to attend church regularly, and that they are more likely to pray, meditate or contemplate than are men (198); that women are more likely than men to consider God very important (200); and that 64.7% of women identify themselves as religious, in comparison with 51.1% of men (199); see Gary D. Bouma & Beverly R. Dixon, *The Religious Factor in Australian Life* (Melbourne: MARC Australia, 1986).
Methodology

The question might be asked: why am I giving precedence to works of fiction in attempting to locate an Australian women’s spirituality? In 1979, Tzvetan Todorov suggested that “perhaps it is through literature that one can read most clearly the characteristics of our time.” Two years later, in Australia, Veronica Brady adopted a similar position:

Literature draws us to the real foundations of any inquiry into the nature of life in a given society since, instead of tracing around the cultural frame through which we look at it, it attempts to get at the experience itself, highlighting it by setting it in an unfamiliar context, in its own fictitious world.

Novels are not life, but a culling of life in accordance with principles adopted by the author. Not only are trivial details excised, but other details are accentuated, and all are ordered, again in accordance with principles adopted by the author. It is this culling, accentuating and ordering that makes novels a fertile ground for the study of “the nature of life in a given society,” for, as Brady suggests, the essential features of life are thus highlighted.

To go further: although it might be said that novels reflect only one person’s view of what is to be encouraged or condemned, the principles which guide the novelist’s interpretations have been determined by the society in which she lives. The novelist and her novels are all part of the society that is interrogated in this search for an Australian spirituality. If an author laments the absence of tenderness or justice in her fictional world, this should not be read as proof that the author is singularly sensitive in comparison to the ‘real’ Australia that is thought to lack these qualities: the fact is, that the ‘real’ world contains both the author and her readers, who are sympathetic to these issues. The intentions and values of the author (as they can be gauged from fictional and factual statements) are not only personal, but also belong to the representations of society which are under scrutiny.

It must be observed, too, that novels and stories have already been used to elucidate Australian malestream spirituality. It is appropriate that the literary field again be investigated to see if it contains evidence of other spiritualities. Do hitherto ignored texts by women offer alternative ways of figuring the divine?

Common sense suggests that women’s fictions might be a particularly fruitful site for investigating metaphysical, moral and spiritual matters. Denied access

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to universities in the nineteenth century by virtue of their gender, and also de­
nied theological training until the second half of the twentieth century, women
who have wanted to communicate their religious experiences and concerns must
have found in novels an ideal vehicle. The pity is that such writing has been so
often regarded as directed only at women, with nothing to say to men. 6

Men’s lack of interest in women’s writing is not peculiar to Australia. As
Virginia Woolf observed,

when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wish­
ing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a
man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be
criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised
by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a dif­
ference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs
from his own. 7

The three Australian women writers to whom I am paying most attention were
chosen because they have been influenced by Christianity, and because they have
been writing through the period affected by late-twentieth-century feminism and
the awakening of interest in feminist theology, whether or not they have been
directly influenced by it. 8 Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan each boast a substantial
body of work, so it becomes possible to trace recurring motives, themes and
concerns and to see how they have developed over a period of social change.
Further, each writer is widely published and may therefore have some influence
on the way in which readers interpret their own experiences and spiritualities.
My intention to include the younger writer Helen Garner was frustrated by lack
of space, although her intimations of urban spirituality would have been sympa­
thetic to the thrust of my arguments.

larly chapter seven, “Women and Writing,” for an account of the separation in English literature be­
tween public and private writing, the latter intended specifically for women. Spender notes that “fic­
tion itself has come close to being identified with the private sphere” (196).


8 It is generally accepted that the second wave of feminism began in the United States, the country
which currently has most influence on Australian popular and theological culture, in the 1960s. The
foundational publications appear to be the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex,
followed by Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique in 1963. The beginning of contemporary Christian
feminism is marked by the 1968 publication of Mary Daly’s The Church and the Second Sex. Sandra
Schneiders suggests that the term ‘feminist spirituality’ arose in the United States in the 1970s and was
mainstreamed there with the publication of Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed.
Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow, in 1979. She notes that the term came into use in Europe in the
1980s – see Sandra M. Schneiders, Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church (New
York: Paulist Press, 1991): 74, 114. The rise of feminist spirituality in Australia is discussed in Chapter
Two below.
No account of Australian Spirituality can aspire to completeness if it disregards the multitude of other faiths that are active in Australia. Considerations of space, however, determined that writings by women of non-Christian background had to be ignored. The works of Aboriginal women writers have also been omitted — a study of Aboriginal women’s spirituality would require quite a different methodology to that used here and would most appropriately be written from an Aboriginal woman’s perspective.

Neither am I importing North American, English, European or other overseas material into the body of this book: my task is to elucidate an Australian Spirituality (or spiritualities) alternative to Desert Spirituality; the comparison of these findings to international feminist theological writings must be carried out elsewhere.

Although this is a search for a spirituality of Christian origins, and although I am looking for representations and hints of the Christian God and God’s activities within the texts, I am using an expansive definition of God: in this context I am understanding God to be “the ultimate source, sustaining power, and goal of the universal process of understanding.” In accepting that “God cannot be caught in a definition, literal picture, or reflection on the whole,” I am casting far and wide for traces of God and God’s activities, not just admitting those manifestations which match the concerns of mainstream Christian theologians. In this I differ from the approach taken by Brady in her seminal study A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God and in later articles on religion and literature. Instead of interrogating fictions for their theological content, I am reading them (in part at least) as meditations upon the divine and seeking to establish what they have to say about God in their own right.

The term ‘spirituality’ is used here to describe the ways in which humans perceive the presence — or absence — of a suprahuman force, and how this affects their interpretation of the universe, their role within it, and their hopes for an ongoing existence beyond the death of the body. I am using the terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ interchangeably in order to broaden the way in which ‘religion’ is usually interpreted, so that women are no longer excluded from ‘religious’ debates. It could be said that this is a typically female (or feminist) approach, as it recognizes the value of individual experience and refuses to isolate God or contain God within the institutional church, its structures and dogmas. The result of such broad-mindedness is a reading of Australia not as a godless society, but as

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9 The importance of Christianity in shaping Australia’s institutions and mores is sufficient justification for my concentration upon it.

a society which is mindful of God and aware that the tribal Christianity of Europe is out of place – Australians are living in a society which is struggling to find ways to represent the divine that are appropriate to contemporary life, culture and circumstance but which are not limited by them.

This move away from traditional ways of expressing devotion is borne out by reports that, although the vast majority of Australians believe in some sort of God,\textsuperscript{11} church attendance is not thought by all to be an essential part of being religious or taking God seriously.\textsuperscript{12} As Bruce Rumbold has commented, in respect to the willingness of Australians to acknowledge a power other than themselves,

> here we have evidence that spirituality of one form or another is widespread within our society. The encounter of church and world cannot any longer be viewed predominantly as an encounter between those who have faith and those who have none. Rather, it is an encounter of different spiritualities, between those who see value in expressing faith in institutional forms and those who own faith in some way without wishing or seeing the need to express it through participation in a religious community.\textsuperscript{13}

It might be objected that my charting of a spirituality based on literary texts is a subjective act, neither objective nor scientific. I would admit to this, believing that all interpretations are subjective, particularly those which profess objectivity. Subjectivity is especially relevant to \textit{Rewriting God} as it is one reader's interpretation of several women's representations of the divine in everyday life. It may or may not reflect other readers' interpretations of the same material, but it is an interpretation that acknowledges the intentions of the authors and attempts to be alert to the subtexts of their books.

It would be dishonest to disguise my personal interest in locating and describing women's contributions to Australian spirituality, although, as theorist David Klemm recommends, I do attempt to subject my own prejudices to scrutiny through open engagement with the chosen texts. My attachment to a feminist-inspired hermeneutics of suspicion must be obvious, however, when dealing with those texts which imply that mainstream spirituality is synonymous with Australian Spirituality. From this perspective, it becomes obvious that women's religious understandings have either been ignored by theologians and religious commentators or assumed to be identical with men's experiences and therefore subsumed into a one-size-fits-all spirituality. Alice Jardine's definition of femi-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Bouma & Dixon, \textit{The Religious Factor}, v; some 41.6\% of people believe in a personal God, 37.0\% believe in some sort of a spirit or life-force, 13.8\% do not know, and 4.5\% claim to be atheists.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Bouma & Dixon, \textit{The Religious Factor}, 14.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{The Religious Factor}, x.
\end{itemize}
Feminism captures the attitude that I have adopted in considering much of this material:

Feminism, while infinite in its variations, is finally rooted in the belief that women's truth-in-experience-and-reality is and has always been different from men's and that it as well as its artefacts and productions have consequently been devalued and always already delegitimized in patriarchal culture.\(^\text{14}\)

Despite this recourse to feminist practice, I have tried to refrain from judging the examples of women's spirituality that I have found against feminist criteria. As already suggested, women's contributions to Australian Spirituality have been ignored because that Spirituality has traditionally been defined in the narrowest of Christian terms: I do not wish to further invalidate women's experience by admitting to this study only those texts which display politically acceptable feminist attitudes. I am, in other words, valuing experience over ideology.

In brief

*Rewriting God* questions the way in which theologians and cultural commentators privilege the paradigm of Desert Spirituality when describing Australians' engagement with the divine. In that Desert Spirituality reflects aspects of Christian teachings and Australian experience, it is not a false spirituality; the assumption that it is a *sufficient* spirituality, however, even when applied only to Australian Christianity, is misguided.

In looking at the writings of Australian women, *Rewriting God* attempts to show that there are other ways of talking about spiritual matters: the women's spirituality which it describes is one of many spiritualities to be found in contemporary Australia. Ideally, it would be recognized, along with Desert Spirituality, as just another participant in this conversation.

There is a danger that any form of spirituality extrapolated from these women's texts will be thought to be as monolithic and exclusive as Desert Spirituality. It is not my intention to construct such a women’s spirituality, although it might seem that there is an element of gender essentialism operating here. This is almost inevitable, as mainstream theological texts have so ignored women's reality that any attempt to promote women as autonomous spiritual beings will seem to be an attack on the natural order. What I should stress is that women's and men's spiritual lives are not necessarily diametrically opposed because of gender differences: women may take spiritual nourishment from the deserted places, and men may look to the settled areas, the beaches and the tropics for

their spiritual well-being. A reading of fictions by contemporary male writers might well reveal spiritual insights similar to those attributed here to women, thus suggesting that those who recognize only Desert Spirituality are not so much oblivious to women as merely behind the times – but that is another debate.

Here are some preliminary insights into the ways in which present-day Australian women are talking about the divine, accompanied by an invitation to recognize the spiritual content of a range of fictional texts. In the long run, it may be found that there are as many forms of Australian Spirituality as there are Australians: this may weaken the monopoly enjoyed by Desert Spirituality, but it may also inspire richer and more varied cultural and theological expressions of the things of the spirit.