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Women and religion in Oceania

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Introduction

Oceanic countries have rich histories of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity beginning with the original Indigenous peoples, and later with significant numbers of explorers, workers and immigrants from the Asia-Pacific region, and European settler colonisers. Across Oceania, women have played a central role in religious life through religious ceremonies, leadership, settlement, establishing and contributing to institutions, research on religion and religiously inspired social justice. This chapter highlights the importance of women in religion in Oceania and their contribution to religious settlement and social justice in particular. We provide a historical overview pertaining to the region, and then focus on two in-depth case studies of Christian and Buddhist women in Australia. We focus on these two groups, given our areas of scholarly expertise and as they have long histories in Australia, with complex and at times intersecting narratives of both interreligious tensions and peacebuilding, in which women have featured prominently. This chapter will also explore how structural violence against women remains an issue across these and other religious communities in Oceania and continues to be addressed by women and male allies, at times with the support of both offline and online international social movements campaigning for gender parity.

Histories and cultural contexts of Oceania

Oceania covers a vast area in the southern hemisphere and is made up of varying land masses, thousands of islands and large areas of ocean. Geographically Oceania sits between Asia and the Americas. It is geographically diverse and spans a wide ecology and climate range as well as many different human cultures. There are 14 countries and a number of territories in the region. The largest country is Australia, followed by Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. Western imperialism dominated Oceania throughout the 18th to the 20th centuries with the colonial forces of France, Portugal and England impacting across cultural, economic and ecological systems, including horrific violence and disruption to Indigenous cultures and religions (National Geographic n.d.). Waves of indentured labourers and migrants from Asia also settled in the region during this period, with greater waves of migration from Europe, Asia and the Middle East in the mid- to late 20th century. These migrants were also subject to brutal treatment and
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The management of economic aid across Oceania largely from the wealthier countries of Australia and New Zealand is now a major political issue, particularly as the impacts of climate change affect smaller islands in the Pacific Ocean (Lyons 2019). Hence, Oceania is characterised by complex histories and flows across the region, including the practice of multiple religious traditions and the imposed dominance of Christianity.

Oceania is home to a wide diversity of Indigenous cultures, who have relied on inter-island trade and inter-community association for thousands of years. With the colonisation of the Pacific in the 18th century and onwards, Indigenous cultures suffered devastating impacts caused by warfare, violence, disease and economic depletion. Loss of land, language, spirituality and cultural traditions were characteristic of the impacts of Western imperialism, but in spite of this, there has been strong resilience among Indigenous peoples and there have been consistent and important relationships built across Oceania’s Indigenous groups focusing on economies, families, arts, sport and cultural development. Indigenous peoples and spiritualities throughout Oceania have also been impacted by the introduction of Western and Eastern religious traditions, including Christian denominations, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Hence, the current characteristics of Indigenous religiosity across the Oceanic area are complex and diverse (Swain and Trompf 1995).

Histories of religion in Australia, New Zealand and Pacific nations also document a diverse religious representation from the earliest days of colonial life (Carey 1996) shaped by the dominance of Christianity in public and private spheres. Indentured labourers and migrants from Asia working in mining, pearling and sugar industries also brought Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam to the region (Reynolds 2003; Bouma and Halafoff 2017; TEEB 2020). Following WW2, an expansive immigration program brought new faith traditions to Pacific countries, particularly Australia, including Orthodox and Eastern Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs from a multitude of nations across Europe, Asia and the Middle East (Carey 1996), with mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship springing up in cities and towns. In many Pacific nations, Christianity remains the dominant religious practice, such as Methodist Christianity in Tonga and Protestantism in New Zealand. In Fiji, Methodism and Hinduism are the largest religions, since large numbers of indentured labourers and migrants from India settled in the country from the 19th century onward. In Papua New Guinea over 90% of the population identify as Christian, but many people combine that with traditional practices of animism and ancestor worship (Swain and Trompf 1995).

Oceania’s geographical proximity to Asia has resulted in relatively high numbers of Hindus and Buddhists migrating across the region, compared to societies in the Global North. More recently, these histories of religious diversity have also been impacted by the rise of the non-religious across Oceania.

The study of women and religion in Oceania

The modern academic study of women and religion in Oceania began with ethnographic accounts mainly from anthropologists. Bronislaw Malinowski, a well-known social anthropologist, lived in the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia for a number of years at the beginning of the 20th century, studying Indigenous cultures and documenting the complex kin structures of practices of reciprocity and exchange (Malinowski 1922). Margaret Mead, a cultural anthropologist, lived in Samoa during the middle of the 20th century and wrote a controversial ethnography detailing the sexual rituals involved in the coming-of-age ceremonies of young girls.
and boys (Mead 1928), as well as an account of the dominance of women in cultures around
the Sepik Basin in western New Guinea (Mead 1935). In Australia, early anthropologies of
Indigenous cultures were written in the 19th and early 20th century by male ethnographers and
contributed to the work of Émile Durkheim (1915), whose account of religion in his famous
and influential text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, relied on the work of Walter Baldwin
Spencer and Francis James Gillen amongst the Arrente people in central Australia. Likewise,
Sigmund Freud (1938) drew on the work of these anthropologists in his work *Totem and Taboo*.
The male-dominated scholarship on religion in Oceania reflected masculinist university dis-
course and largely omitted documenting the religious activity of women and acknowledging
the work of woman scholars.

Feminist critiques of Durkheim’s thesis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* point
out that the establishment and function of the sacred/profane dichotomy on which much
modern religious studies has been premised incorrectly cited women and children as located
only within the profane or ordinary spheres of life, without access to the power of religious
ritual and spiritual life. This premise was based on a misunderstanding of the gendered divi-
sion of labour and structure of kin networks and led to a discourse within religious studies
and the sociology and anthropology of religion in Australian universities, where women
were effectively disregarded as agents of religious and spiritual power (Joy and Magee, 1994).

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Accounts of the lives and cultural responsibilities of Aboriginal women had in fact been written throughout the 20th century by women anthropologists including Daisy Bates (1938), Phyllis Kaberry (1939) and Catherine Berndt (1950, 1965, 1970), but it was not until anthropologist Diane Bell published her ethnographic account of life with Aboriginal women in central Australia—*Daughters of the Dreaming*—in 1983 that mainstream misconceptions were corrected and women’s agency and authority in land management, law and religious ceremony were recognised. Bell’s work was an important critique of male anthropology, and she demonstrated that early scholarship on religion, including Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms*, ‘cast women as the profane and “other”’ (Bell 2005). Other significant feminist anthropologists have since produced important works on the religious and social life of Indigenous women across Australia, including Indigenous anthropologist Marcia Langton (2006), and white feminist anthropologists scholars Deborah Bird Rose (1992) and Gillian Cowlishaw (2004) (Standish 2014).

Histories of women in religion, and in particular Christianity, are largely confined to Australia and New Zealand and, by all accounts, were predominantly written by men up until the 1960s. The rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s onwards encouraged women historians and social scientists to begin looking at the status of women in religious communities and institutions and particular forms of women’s religious activity and experience (Halafoff et al. 2018; Joy and Magee 1994; Tulip and McPhillips 1998). Moreover, women in religious traditions globally, including throughout Oceania, began questioning the patriarchal cultures of their religious traditions, and many contributed to cultural and structural changes over this period, including the ordination of women in the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Uniting Churches in the 1980s, as well as ongoing challenges to masculinist liturgical language and male clerical hierarchies (Thiering 1973; Tulip and McPhillips 1998). Religious organisations were a case study in patriarchal formations, and the fight for women to have access to organisational power and religious authority continues today (McPhillips 2016). Christian women were also writing histories of important female figures, forming feminist collectives, producing magazines and publicly protesting (Carey 1987). Buddhist women were also campaigning for high ordination of women and challenging gender inequality globally and within Oceania from the 1980s onward (Halafoff et al. 2018).

The omission of women from the histories and accounts of religious authority continues to have an impact on the discourses of religious studies with corrective and innovative work being undertaken by Indigenous scholars Anne Pattel-Gray and Lee Miena Skye (Pattel-Gray 1998, 2000; Skye 2001, 2007), scholars of religion, anthropologists, historians and feminist scholars from diverse cultural and religious, including non-religious backgrounds. Many of these women also have an activist and/or critical feminist orientation, with the aim of making women more visible in scholarship on religion and to advance gender equality and respect for cultural and religious diversity more broadly. Currently, the discourse of women and religion in Oceania can be located mostly in theological, historical, sociological, anthropological and religious studies paradigms.

**Women and religion in Oceania—scholarship and critique**

The majority of scholarship in the field of women and religion in Oceania emanates from Australian and New Zealand researchers. Writing on Australian Indigenous women in historical accounts of religious life in Australia prior to the mid-1900s, the feminist anthropologist Diane Bell (2005) explained, ‘Denied agency, women are shadows in the landscape: they cannot and do not speak directly of their lives, beliefs, and practices.’ Thus, until
the mid-20th century, research on Indigenous religion throughout the region was largely focused on male leadership and ceremonies (Bell 2005; Simpson 1994). Women scholars, in the mid- to late 20th century, documented the religious lives, gender roles and ceremonies of Indigenous women in detail, re-examining earlier historical accounts and/or conducting their own fieldwork, in Australia (Kaberry 1939; Berndt 1950, 1965, 1970; Gale ed. 1970; Bell 1983), New Zealand (Salmond 1975, 1976, 1981; Metge 1976) and the Pacific nations (Strathern 1972, 1988, ed. 1987; Gillison 1993; Lepowsky 1993). This scholarship included Indigenous theology (Pattel-Grey 1996, 1998, 2000; Te Paa Daniel 2001, 2013; Skye, 2007). Bell (2005) explained, ‘Bringing women into active voice in the ceremonial domain has been the work of women. To explore what was going on in women-only domains required a woman researcher, one who could be trusted with women’s secrets.’

Prior to the 1950s, scholarship on Christianity in Oceania tended towards a focus on religious institutions and male clergy leaders, although there were some significant women who emerged amongst Christian denominations and made an impact in education and social work, including Daisy Bates, Caroline Chisolm and Mary McKillop in Australia (Carey 1996; Joy and Magee, 1994; O’Brien 1997; Simpson 1994; Thompson 1997). According to Jane Simpson (1994, p. 199), scholarship on religion in New Zealand, and in particular early church histories, largely ‘rendered women invisible’, given they were written ‘from “above” rather than from “below”’ and were focused on clergy and institutions. However, as Anne O’Brien (1997, pp. 126–127) noted, religious women have been ‘effective agents’ for shaping values and public life in Australia, although their contributions were often ‘considerably more difficult to discern’ than their [prominent] male contemporaries ‘politic[ing]’. Simpson (1994, p. 218 citing Stuart 1986) also observed how in early New Zealand scholarship on religion, the focus was more on women’s social roles in Christian churches and not on their roles in society, and that ‘men writing on women tended to employ a role-division into public versus private, while women writing on themselves intertwined the public and private sides of life.’ This is verified by Church historian Katharine Massam (1996), who argued that in early to mid-20th-century Australian Catholicism, a close relationship between religious piety and social activism saw lay women largely authoritative in the home while men were active in public places, including politics and social policy.

As noted previously from the 1970s onward, the impact of feminist scholarship transformed the discourse of religious studies with women scholars and activists producing a substantive amount of scholarship on Christianity and religion in Oceania. Scholars researched the lives of Christian missionary wives (Carey 1995), Christian education for women (Fitzpatrick 1975; Zainu’ddin 1982), Christian mothers and/or the Anglican Mothers’ Union (Teale 1977; Willis 1980; Matheson 1992; Grimshaw 1993), Catholic women’s activism in Australia (Carey 1987; Kennedy 1985; Massam, 1996) and Christian women’s roles in charitable organisations (McGrath 1994). Porter (1989) researched female ordination in the Anglican Church in Australia, as did Lindsay and Scarfe (2012). In New Zealand, scholars wrote on women in parish life (Peters 1986), the origins of the women’s movement in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (Bunkle 1980) and women’s ordination debates (Neave 1990). Patricia Grimshaw has made a particularly important contribution to this scholarship, looking at the impact of Christian missionary practices on Indigenous communities in Australia, as well as in the Pacific (Cruickshank and Grimshaw 2019), and histories of women in Australia (Grimshaw et al. 1994) and New Zealand (Grimshaw 2018).

Gary D. Bouma and Jan Brace-Govan (2000, p. 159) also observed that following the colonisation of Australia, immigrant ‘women have played an under sung role in processes of religious settlement, the negotiation of religious and cultural diversity and in the emergence of
religious settlement is the process by which a religion migrates and establishes itself into a new context (Bouma 1997), and gender shapes the way this process is negotiated (Bouma and Brace-Govan 2000). There is little information available of the religious lives of the earliest non-Christian immigrants in Australia, including Taoists, Confucianists, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, despite their large numbers especially in the far north of Australia in the pearling, mining and sugar cane industries. Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus also have a long history in the region, and both Australia and New Zealand still have significant percentages of adherents of all three of these religions. While a significant amount of research has been undertaken on the cultural lives and biographies of immigrants, it is only relatively recently that scholars have turned their attention to researching the religious dimensions of their lives, through examining historical records and conducting fieldwork. There were much fewer immigrant women than men living and working in these regions, and places of worship such as the earliest temples and mosques are typically depicted as being cared for by men (Hill 1940; Reynolds 2003). While female journalists Daisy Bates and Ernestine Hill were among the few who did document Indigenous and/or Confucian/Taoist/Buddhist and Muslim religious ceremonies in the north of Australia in the first half of the 20th century, these early written and photographic accounts focused more on men than women, given the times they were writing in (Bates 1938; Hill 1940; Bell 2005).

Most post-1950 scholarship on immigrant religious communities in Oceania has been focused on the Abrahamic faiths. The 1788 first fleet of convicts from Britain included Jews, whose history in Australia dates back to this time. Jewish merchants, miners and whalers also settled in Oceania, mainly in Australia and New Zealand from the 18th century onwards. Scholars have documented the diverse Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewish communities’ histories, including the role of women in Jewish institutions, women’s organisations, synagogues, museums, media, the arts, schools, philanthropy, welfare, medicine and politics in Australia (Levi and Bergman 1974; Rubinstein 1987; Rubinstein and Rubinstein 1991; Rutland 1998) and New Zealand (Goldman 1958; Gluckman and Gluckman 1990–1993; Wittman 1998; Levine 1999; Newton 2000). Jewish communities also have long and ongoing painful experiences of anti-Semitism levelled against them and also of countering anti-Semitism across the region. Notable scholarship includes that of Hilary L. Rubinstein (1987), Rubinstein and Rubinstein (1991) and Susanne Rutland (1998) on Australia, and Livia Wittman (1998) and Marlo L. Newton (2000) on New Zealand.

Islam has also received a large amount of scholarly attention in recent years, due to increased media attention globally since September 11, 2001. A corresponding rise of Islamophobia is often targeted at Muslim women, particularly given their visibility if they wear the hijab, niqab or burka, reflecting global patterns (Green 2015; Hyder et al. 2015). Many scholars have investigated this disturbing phenomena and also strategies of religious coping and the way in which Muslim women have been countering negative prejudices in Australia (Rozario 1998; Aly and Walker 2007; Yasseen 2007; McCue 2008; Woodlock 2010; Akbarzadeh, 2010; Carland 2012, 2017; McPhillips, 2020) and New Zealand (KRC, 2010; Jasperse et al., 2012; Kolig 2009; Dobson 2012; Ash et al. 2019).

Far less has been written about Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in Oceania. A case study later within this chapter is focused on Buddhist women in Australia. A recent edited collection on Indian diasporas in Australia (Billomoria et al. 2015) features a chapter on Indian Hindu and Sikh women’s religious coping, mainly focused on rituals in the private sphere, by Selena Costa-Pinto (2015). Sally McAra (2009) and Michele Barker and McAra (2012) have documented the history of Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand, W. H. McLeod (1986) has written on Punjabis in New Zealand and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed. 2010) has published an edited
collection on Indian Hindus and Sikhs in New Zealand, but none of this scholarship has been primarily focused on women.

Indigenous and settler colonial Christian gendered patterns of relating have shaped Oceania’s gender norms, as have women’s social movements campaigning for gender equality. So-called minority faiths also carry with them their own gender norms, and these can be challenged by the norms of the so-called host society. These gender norms, however, are complex and internally diverse within all religious traditions, varying from the conservative to the progressive. While significant cultural and political change has ensured that gender is a constant issue for religious communities, strong debates persist concerning women’s ordination rights, gender equality, family values, religion, sexuality and education, and religious freedom and exemptions across the Pacific region.

**Case study: Women and Christianity in Australia**

In contemporary Australian Christianity, many women experience an unsettled relationship with their faith tradition, whether it is newer forms of evangelical denominations (Maddox 2013) or more conventional forms such as Catholicism (Kennedy 1985; McEwan 2018). Gender expectations around women’s (often lack of) access to and participation in leadership roles, and conservative moral positions on issues of sexuality and embodiment, coupled with patriarchal male leadership and biblical interpretation, has marginalised and isolated many women within their religious traditions (McPhillips 2016). It has also led to particular forms of feminist responses in Christian communities. In the current #MeToo environment, accounts of gendered violence within Christian churches, particularly domestic violence, continue to grow and are regularly documented in the media (Baird 2015). As well, the scandal of child sexual abuse in religious institutions has been examined by multiple public inquiries, most recently the landmark Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, with Anglicanism and Catholicism contributing most of the cases of abuse across all Australian institutions (Wright et al. 2017).

**Early Christian women’s voices**

From the earliest days of white colonisation, Christian women, who were active in reforming the public sphere, also tended to advocate for religious reform of their faith organisations, and in some of the more liberal protestant denominations women emerged as figures of religious authority in their congregations (Carey 1996; McPhillips 2016). Most notable are the struggles for women’s suffrage in the early 20th century (Porter 1995). Women sought church leadership positions in a variety of ways, and many women found in religion a source of empowerment that prepared them for public leadership, whether it was given formally or not, and often this involved an interpretation of ‘key religious texts in terms of equality and empowerment which led them to develop a starkly oppositional stance to dominant interpretations’ (Swain 2014). While being bound by a conservative theology of obedience, it was also the case that women religious were leaders in education and social welfare and some, like Mary MacKillop, who was sainted in 2010 in the Catholic Church, refused to bow to episcopal agendas (O’Brien 1994).

It is important to note that in both colonial and postcolonial Australia, Christian women fought—and continue to fight—two patriarchies: the male state and the male church hierarchy. Many Christian women in Australia sought to radicalise their faith and church as well as political structures. They understood that religious tradition and public institutions were both subject to the same historical and political contingencies in which change could be impacted (McPhillips 2016).
Christian women in late modernity

By the late 1960s as social change agendas gripped Australian culture, church membership numbers had begun a radical decline and those professing ‘no religion’ began to rise. Church was no longer a central part of the lives of families and women in particular (Carey 1996). By the 1970s, when women began organising for reform in the churches, formal membership of religious groups had dropped to less than 60% of the total population (Carey 1996) and religion was of little national interest (Singleton 2014). Second-wave feminism had a significant impact on Christian women, and specific forms of feminism emerged from women’s struggles to transform sexism in the churches (Brennan 1998; Tulip and McPhillips 1998). Women mobilised into church-based and interfaith social movements that affected lasting change, in particular the Catholic, Anglican and Unitingchurches. One of the earliest groups, Christian Women Concerned (CWC), formed in Sydney in 1968 with women coming together from numerous denominations to ‘break the voicelessness of women in the church and publicly speak about their concerns’ (Tulip and McPhillips 1998, p. 266). Christian feminists, largely white and middle class, were also forming links with Indigenous women through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission run by the Australian Council of Churches and listening to the experiences of Indigenous women via conferences and publications (Pattel-Gray 2000). Christian feminists followed agendas of social change and justice that focused on the intersectionality of class, race, ethnicity and religion and from which new forms of spirituality and religious experience grew.

In the 1980s new groups formed, including the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW; Anglican), the Women–Church Movement (post-church), Women and the Australian Church (WATAC—primarily Catholic), Feminists in the Uniting Church (FUN) and the Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW). Issues of ordination, liturgical language, participation in liturgy and church governance, access to positions of religious authority, theological education and women’s spirituality were uppermost. These agendas were parallel with the reforms that feminists were fighting for in the secular world: changes to law, equal access to education and jobs, reproduction rights and the recognition of domestic labour inequities (McPhillips 2016).

Reform, radicalisation and scholarship

During the 1990s, MOW, WATAC and Women–Church organised a series of national feminist theology conferences, which brought together hundreds of women hungry for intellectual, practical and ritual reinvention (McPhillips 2016; White and Tulip, 1991). Christian feminist theology emerged as an important site of study and reflection, and responses were contested and interwoven with other projects of social change, especially involving issues of race, ethnicity and class politics (Joy and Magee, 1994; McPhillips 2016). The Australian Feminist Theology Foundation (AFTF) was launched, which provided funding and loans for women eager to study in the US and undertake projects.

In 1992 a new association called Women Scholars of Religion and Theology was founded with the aim of bringing together women who were working, researching, teaching and living in the Oceanic region (Wainwright 2004). The new regional focus was an important development in reimagining the work of Christian feminists and opening up to new theologies and cultural realities across the Pacific region. The association held three conferences in Australia and New Zealand and founded a journal called Seachanges. This journal is still active and has published seven volumes of essays by scholars and postgraduate students across Australia, New
Zealand and Fiji. It articulates many of the social and theological concerns of women in the Pacific as well as providing a means for creative theological reflection about what it means to live and belong in the Pacific region.

The impacts of reform in the Christian churches were uneven. An increase in participation levels for women occurred at some parish and administrative sites, there were some changes to liturgical language, and in the Anglican and Uniting churches women’s leadership capacities were recognised via the ordination of women. Some religious organisations failed to move to a more inclusive gender agenda, including the Presbyterian Church, which rescinded women’s ordination rites in 1995, leaving ordained women in a complete quandary (Tulip and McPhillips 1998), and the Catholic Church, where women continue to be stymied by a male clerical elite that keeps women out of positions of responsibility and power (McPhillips, 2016; Schneiders 1991). Even in Uniting and Anglican Churches, where ordination has now been commonplace for well over 30 years, recent studies show that there remain significant issues of marginalisation and mistreatment of women clergy (Bouma 2014; Thomson, 2014). As Janet Scarfe (2014) stated, changing the rules was not akin to changing the culture.

In recent years, women’s counter-hegemonic voices in the Protestant churches have turned to other issues, in particular ongoing violence against women and children (Baird 2015). Family-based and institutional forms of gendered violence are common and particularly active in religious communities (Baird 2015; Wright et al. 2017). Women in the Catholic Church have recently found new energy for moving reform agendas forward. WATAC has re-established an online seminar and project series; feminist Catholic scholars (McEwan 2018) and the global protest movement Voices of Faith are active in Australia, pushing agendas for women’s inclusion in church leadership and governance.

Case study: women and Buddhism in Australia

Buddhism has had a long, rich and relatively under-researched history in Australia, compared to that of Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Halafoff et al. 2012). While Ming dynasty explorers from China may have reached Australia as early as the 15th century, indentured labourers and miners began settling in significant numbers in Australia in the mid-1800s’ Gold Rush period. These large Chinese communities established joss houses, Chinese temples with Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist symbols, all around the country. Among the first appearances of Buddhist women in Australia were the many statues and paintings of the Buddhist goddess Kuan Yin within these temples. Smaller Sri Lankan Buddhist communities were also established in north Queensland, in the Torres Strait Islands and Western Australia working in the sugar cane industry and pearling industries. Japanese Buddhist communities also had a significant presence in pearling in Thursday Island and Broome (Croucher 1989).

While the vast majority of these Chinese, Sri Lankan and Japanese immigrants and workers were men, some women accompanied their husbands or fathers to Australia. Daughters were also born there. In addition, significant numbers of Chinese and particularly Japanese sex workers worked in pearling and mining towns across the country. Very little is known about the religious lives of these communities and the women within them, as most scholarship on that period has focused on intercultural relations between them and Indigenous and European Australians (Jones 1989; Reynolds 2003).

Australia, prior to the introduction of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, was far more religiously diverse than it was during the ‘White Australia Policy’ years (1901–1973). This racist act was indeed passed largely because of fears regarding the large Chinese and Japanese settlements in the Far North, where immigrants from Asia outnumbered Europeans. Many non-white
workers and migrants were forced to leave Australia, but those who were born there, who could pass a dictation test or who worked in the pearling industry were able to stay, hence the White Australia period was not actually as white as commonly perceived. While the numbers of ‘ethnic’ Buddhists did decline in these years, especially following the Second World War internment of the Japanese in Australia, Europeans also began to take an interest in and in some cases even converted to Buddhism in the early 20th century (Croucher 1989; Jones 1989; Reynolds 2003).  

Paul Croucher’s (1989) Buddhism in Australia: 1848–1988 focuses mainly on these ‘white Buddhists’ and the establishment of Buddhist societies in Melbourne and Sydney and centres along the East Coast of Australia. Women featured prominently in Buddhism during this period, notably Elise Pickett, a Russian woman who founded the Melbourne Theosophical Society branch and was the first ‘“White Buddhist” to have set foot on Australian shores’ (Croucher 1989, p. 9). Marie Byles, a lawyer, conservationist, pacifist, feminist and author of several books on Buddhism, and Natasha Jackson, a Russian Communist Australian and a socially engaged Buddhist who marched against the Vietnam War and for Aboriginal land rights, were both prominent figures in Buddhism in New South Wales in the 20th century (Croucher 1989; Lyall 2014). Elizabeth Bell was the president of the Buddhist Society of Victoria (BSV) in the 1970s, and Bell and the BSV developed strong links with Sri Lankan and Thai traditions and communities that were being established in Australia at this time, as the White Australia Policy finally was lifted. Bell also helped organise the Dalai Lama’s first visit to Australia (Croucher 1989; AWAP 2014). In addition to Sri Lankan and Thai traditions, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, Burmese and Laotian temples were also established throughout Australia from the 1970s onward (Croucher 1989).

Post-1970s Buddhism in Australia

Despite the leadership of these women, gender inequality continues to be a persistent problem within Buddhist communities and institutions globally and began to be widely challenged by American Buddhist women scholars and activists, such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Rita M. Gross in the late 20th century (Gross 1993; Tsomo 2009). Momentum has been steadily building within the global Buddhist women’s movement, which draws on both Buddhist and feminist principles, and has been accelerated in recent years through its use of digital platforms, to challenge patriarchal religious authority. Australian women have played an important role within these Buddhist women’s movements and scholarship on them (Tsomo 2009; Rocha and Barker eds. 2011; Tomalin et al. 2015; Halafoff et al. forthcoming).

Women continued to play a prominent role as teachers and also benefactors in this period, donating land to establish temples in Thai and Tibetan traditions in Australia. Jewish German-born Ilse Ledermann, who was later ordained and became a well-known Buddhist teacher, Ayya Khema, bought land to establish Wat Buddha Dhamma north of Sydney. One of her students, Australian Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim, is currently one of Australia’s most well-respected teachers and senior Buddhist nuns in a Korean tradition. Sunim has also held leadership positions in the Australian Sangha Association, the national organisation for ordained Buddhists, that has long been committed to gender equality (Croucher 1989; Sunim 2015). Ledermann/Khema also played a central role in establishing the international Buddhist women’s movement Sakyaadita in 1987, to campaign for gender equality and high (bhikkhuni) ordination for women, with the American Tibetan Bhikkhuni Tsomo and the Thai professor and Bhikkhuni Chatsumarn Kabilsingh/Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (Sakyadhita n.d.). Sakyaadita continues to hold biannual conferences, the latest which was held in Australia in 2019, and also has an Australian branch (Sakyadhita Australia n.d.).
Ayya Nirodha Bhikkhuni, formerly Elisabeth Gorski, was also a student of Ledermann’s in the 1970s. She purchased land in Bundanoon NSW in the mid-1980s to establish a meditation centre in the Thai Forest tradition, Santi Monastery. Niroda was among the first nuns to have received full bhikkhuni ordination in Australia in the Thai Forest tradition, in 2009 (Nirodha 2015). These bhikkhuni ordinations have been the subject of considerable controversy, given that they have been opposed by the Thai Forest tradition’s leadership in Thailand (Halafoff et al. forthcoming). Women Marie Obst/Yeshe Khadro and Kathy Vichta also donated land they co-owned with their male partners in Southern Queensland to establish Australia’s first Tibetan Buddhist retreat centre, Chenrezig Institute (Khadro 2015; Vichta 2015). Khadro lived for a time in Nepal and returned to Australia in the mid-1980s and has worked in Buddhist informed palliative care, directing Karuna Hospice in Brisbane since 1996 (Khadro 2015).

Another internationally well-known teacher is Australian Tibetan Buddhist nun Venerable Robina Courtin. Born in Melbourne, she was a radical left-wing, black politics and feminist activist, who later founded the Liberation Prison Project (LPP) providing Buddhist teachings to prisoners on death row (Halafoff 2011; Courtin 2015). This commitment to socially engaged Buddhism among Australian Buddhist women is ongoing, evident in the recent Festival of Radical Awakening (FORA 2020) online event convened by Australian Buddhist nun Ayya Yeshe, that included an emphasis on gender, sexuality, racial and multispecies equality. Finally, a team of Australian scholars, led by Anna Halafoff and Cristina Rocha, are currently seeking funding to further document the history of Buddhism in the Far North of Australia and to record additional oral histories of Indigenous and Asian-Australian Buddhist women and women from Zen, Vipassana/Insight, and other Tibetan traditions, in an ongoing research project that aims to further document the rich history and contemporary developments of Buddhism in Australia.

**Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates that women have played significant roles in religious organisations, campaigning for social justice and studies of religion across Oceania. As in other regions, attention to women in religion was largely lacking in male-dominated scholarship before the mid-20th century despite the fact that women were visibly active in faith work. From the 1970s onwards women scholars of religion, including Indigenous scholars, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, theologians and feminist scholars, have succeeded in making women more visible in scholarship addressing religion, including scholarship focused on countering violence against women and in advancing gender equality and respect for cultural and religious diversity more broadly. This is an ongoing pursuit, particularly given the rise of populist, anti-feminist and patriarchal narratives in current times, both within religious institutions and in the public sphere. It is all too often met with resistance from religious leaders.

Women’s involvement in religion spans both private and public domains, which are increasingly viewed as overlapping spheres with the personal informing the political. In the face of religious and/or gender discrimination, women in Oceania employ religiously inspired coping strategies and activism to address gender inequalities. For religious women, the alliance between faith and social action is a non-issue—their religious conviction is the rationale for their political involvement and their moral principles. Social activism has a religiously informed dimension, and agendas for change cover structural, literary and symbolic dimensions of women’s lives (Massam, 1996; Porter 1995). Religious and spiritual women have been and continue to be forces for social change and involved in contemporary issues such as female ordination, the #MeToo movement, recent Women’s Marches across Australia and climate change activism.
This activism is inspired by both religious and feminist calls to action, for justice and peace for all people and species.

While there has been significant scholarship on women and Indigenous spirituality and religion, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and white Buddhist women in Oceania, more research needs to be conducted on women and Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism in Oceania from the earliest settlement of Chinese, Indian, Sri Lankan and Japanese in the region until now. This chapter also reveals that scholarship on women and religion in Oceania is still dominated by white voices, emerging from Australia and New Zealand, rather than reflecting the culturally and religiously diverse reality of the region. This imbalance is in the process of being addressed but will require more research resources and time to be adequately corrected.

Notes
1 Anna Halafoff, Kim Lam, Cristina Rocha, Enqi Weng and Sue Smith are currently conducting yet to be published research on Buddhism in the far north of Australia. (See Anna Halafoff, Kim Lam, Cristina Rocha, Enqi Weng and Sue Smith (under review) 'Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre WWII: (In) Visibility, Postcolonialism and Materiality').
2 See Halafoff et al.'s forthcoming publication on Buddhism in the far north of Australia. (under review) 'Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre WWII: (In) Visibility, Postcolonialism and Materiality'.
4 The Uniting Church formed in 1977 in Australia from an amalgamation of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches.
5 www.wsrt.asn.au/.
7 See Halafoff et al.'s forthcoming publication on Buddhism in the far north of Australia. (under review) 'Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre WWII: (In) Visibility, Postcolonialism and Materiality'.
8 See Halafoff et al.'s forthcoming publication on Buddhism in the far north of Australia. (under review) 'Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre WWII: (In) Visibility, Postcolonialism and Materiality'.
9 See Halafoff et al.'s forthcoming publication on Buddhism in the far north of Australia. (under review) 'Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre WWII: (In) Visibility, Postcolonialism and Materiality'.

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