Bringing Women into a Broad Space:
Spiritual direction with women from conservative religious contexts

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.
The disadvantage that women experience in patriarchal religious communities is well documented and it affects the self-validation of their personal spiritual experiences. The patriarchal domination of women’s spirituality in conservative contexts has disempowered women’s faith-experience through limiting their ways of knowing God to those that involve a masculinised paradigm. Such limitations stifle the validation of women’s self-actuated faith. This thesis has undertaken a study with Australian women who have experienced a conservative religious background and has explored the benefits they have found in accessing spiritual direction. A framework for feminine spirituality has then been developed out of the research.

For women, speaking about personal experience is limited by the style of language and conceptualisation in conservatism, and by the sanctioned mode of being female and the roles deemed suitable for women in the congregation. Limitations from the collective shadow of a conservative faith-group prevent women speaking openly about their authentic spiritual experiences. Conversation, this thesis will assert, is a feminine mode of validation and the quality of the conversation space is an important aspect of validation. Using a feminist narrative research methodology, an investigation into the benefits of engaging in one-to-one conversations with a spiritual director has been designed to look at the potential outcomes for women, particularly with regard to validating a personal feminine spirituality.

The biblical metaphor of a “broad space” has been used as a framework for raising awareness about aspects of the spiritual direction conversation space that limit and aid the exploration of authentic spiritual experience. Issues considered in this thesis include the limitations of conservative shadow effects, inherited female role models, the process of spiritual direction and the personality attributes of the spiritual director. Narrative selections of interview transcripts are used verbatim to indicate the influence of these attributes on the personal faith journey of the women participants. It will be shown that their comments help clarify how shadow constraints and cultural subtexts interfere with the potential for deep personal self-validation by a directee. A summary section then looks at the reported benefits of engaging in spiritual direction. Finally, a rationale has been developed for speaking about feminine spirituality as it was revealed in the women’s narratives.
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Introduction

The contemporary emphasis on individualization in postmodern Western society, marked by freedom of choice and individual autonomy, has consequently created the liberty for every woman in such a society to embrace faith uniquely according to her own life experience. Changes in both the theories of spirituality and of identity offer ways to sketch the shifting trends that impact upon how a 21st century person structures their life strategies in relation to their existential context. However, the continued dominance of the patriarchy in religious culture limits the language and ideas about women’s spiritual realities to a gender specific discourse created from a male perspective. For many women who belong to conservative faith communities influenced by this patriarchal discourse, the sociological reality of how faith-life is lived is counter to the freedoms that are encouraged in the wider community.

Feminist theology has had a role in examining the foundations of conservative, stereotypical attitudes that ascribe the role of women within the patriarchal system. Feminist approaches to discussions about faith and spirituality have helped to broaden the understanding of the place of a feminine identity based upon experiential selfhood rather than a stereotypical proscription that limits the freedom to choose how to engage one’s spiritual experiences. A conservative faith context is bounded by statements of faith that proscribe the limits of

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1 Individualisation refers to a societal tendency in recent decades for the individual to expect choice in most aspects of their lives: “In contemporary Western society, individual choice refers not only to consumption, it has become an important part of the public discourse as well as social science language used to analyse many fields of people’s lives. The freedom to choose is the marker of the free, autonomous individual, and it is an important ingredient in the notion of agency.” Brannen, J. and A. Nilsen (2005). “Individualisation, Choice and Structure: A discussion of current trends in sociological analysis.” The Sociological Review 53(3): 412-428.

2 The conservative paradigm describes a wide variety of phenomenologically complex forms that have a generally agreed set of sociological characteristics and psychological outcomes. In Chapter 1 “Implications of Conservatism,” the discussion outlines a conservative community of believers as those bounded by agreed tenets that circumscribe
acceptability for members of the community, both theologically and behaviourally. Key aspects of personhood-in-relation for women in a conservative faith community, both in relation to others and to a sense of the Ultimate\(^3\), are fashioned into a compliant mode of being female that obeys the norms required to effect acceptance and affirmation. As conservatism is patriarchally based, this mode of being female is based on ways of being that are often not synergistic with a natural engagement with transcendent\(^4\) experienced by women. Within the underlying paradigm of a patriarchal conservative milieu, it is difficult to provide a place for women to express their spiritual experience in ways that helps them to make sense of their experience and to validate it as a way of embedding soul truth\(^5\).

I have engaged this study from the perspective of a practicing spiritual director\(^6\) who has also been a member of a conservative faith community. During my practice, I have encountered women in spiritual direction who struggle with self-validation and who doubt the acceptability of their faith. These women have come to spiritual direction because of a desire to become more fully who they are in God and fight the demons of self-doubt and worthlessness.

The study refers to some key ideas of Nicola Slee as she has written about women’s faith development. (Slee 2004) Her research considered the faith experience of women and the means by which they constructed their faith. I wanted to take the descriptors of women’s engagement with faith experience that Slee developed and use them to observe the way orthodox beliefs and values of the group, and which are adhered to by behavioural attitudes that circumscribe the limits of acceptability. See p.16

\(^3\)Reference to God or euphemisms for God will be capitalised throughout to refer to an inferred divine identity, unless used in a quotation from cited literature. The original form in the quote will then be retained.

\(^4\)The term transcendent will be used as defined by Piedmont: A “transcendent perspective is one in which a person sees a fundamental unity underlying the diverse strivings of nature and finds a bonding with others that cannot be severed, not even by death.” It has implications for a more holistic and interconnected view of life experience. Using this generalised approach will keep the breadth of meaning open to what individuals may infer when speaking about spiritual experience. Piedmont, R. L. (1999). “Does Spirituality Represent the Sixth Factor of Personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model.” *Journal of Personality* 67(6): 985-1013. p.988

\(^5\)Soul truth is referred to as the deep inner knowing that contributes to the fabric of a person’s perception of their identity.

\(^6\)The term spiritual director will follow Conn’s description in this study. She states, the term spiritual director “has traditionally been given to a person gifted with the ability to help others notice and respond to the Spirit’s direction.” Conn, J. W. (1999). “Spiritual Formation.” *Theology Today* 56(1): 86-97.
women speak about the environment of spiritual direction. Some women attend spiritual direction outside of their usual conservative faith community and there are likely to be different conventions for speaking about faith in that environment. It is proposed that these descriptors should be evident in the way women speak of their spiritual experience when given space to speak openly. The study will investigate the validity of such a proposition by examining perceived outcomes of accessing a spiritual direction space and will specifically observe any indicators of a change in empowerment and the liberation of a feminine spirituality in the women’s narratives. A key determination in designing the study was the belief that allowing women to speak their own story is inherently affirming and is important for women to feel they have been heard.

A significant aspect of the research is to ground the use of the terms ‘feminine engagement’ and ‘feminine spirituality’ as a mode of interacting with reality that has recognisable characteristics. The term ‘feminine’ used in ‘feminine spirituality’ will indicate specific modalities that are used to interact with spiritual experience and have distinctive and recognisable attributes. This is a different use of the word ‘feminine’ from the term used sociologically to limit or categorise individuals with a female body. In this thesis, ‘feminine modalities’ describe particular psychological capacities used to engage reality and this idea will be expanded in later sections.

This approach creates a linguistic conundrum with regard to using the word ‘feminine’ throughout much of this thesis. The naming of different modalities for engaging reality as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ arises from what is observed as preferential ways of epistematic engagement in male and female persons. Therefore, the term ‘feminine’ in ‘feminine engagement’ and ‘feminine spirituality’ is retained to describe a style of modality regularly observed in women’s responses but which refers to psychological and epistemic processes rather than observable behaviours found only in women. It is acknowledged that this is a specific use of these terms that may not represent other femininst positions.
Such a viewpoint is based upon a Jungian approach to the nature of the individual psyche. Jung argues for the human psyche being constituted by both masculine and feminine aspects, each impacting the behavioural preferences of the individual. He explains the differences between these aspects as due to the psychology of females being founded upon the principle of Eros and the psychology of males on the principle of Logos. He notes, “The concept of Eros could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of Logos as objective interest.” (Jung 1982,65) Jung continues to describe his observations of male and female social interaction by deliberately contrasting the differences between the feminine characteristic of relatedness-based responses with a logic-based masculine response to the experience. (67) This basic differential between psychic expression in men and women has played a key part in developing the model of feminine spirituality being suggested in this thesis. It requires a particular nuance of the term in order to avoid language that assumes reference to only women’s experience or to prevent the discussion taking an oppositional stance between what belongs to men and what belongs to women. From a Jungian perspective, each capacity is available in both males and females.

Using this approach, the investigation will focus on the characteristics of feminine engagement with spiritual experience that have previously been dismissed or denied as a basis for speaking about faith. It will investigate if there are any benefits of a spiritual direction space for enabling the validation of women’s faith experiences that have not been affirmed in former conservative religious contexts. The information that is received will be examined to observe evidence for the development of a feminine spirituality in women that is not normally sanctioned in a conservative faith context.

In a time of freedom for women to choose life, regardless of the potential fulfilment of their ambitions, it would seem that religious freedom is still defined by societal and cultural forms. Over the past twenty years, feminist social commentators have challenged some of the foundational theories and research methods that underpin cultural norms. They have
challenged the normative bases of equality and domination (MacKinnon 1987), male-based psychological theories of moral development (Gilligan 1987), and the elemental assertion of religions that divinises a male god. (Christ 2006) Social commentators posit that those who actually theorise gender have constructed their theories using a masculine perspective. (Alexander and Mohanty 2000) The dominant theories about gender have been largely constructed within a patriarchal context and have not allowed feminine ways of engagement to influence the mode of being female that has been created as the conservative norm. A masculine mode of engagement has been the predominant platform used to ascribe the female gender in conservative faith contexts and has been a significant cause of the dismissal or diminishment of women by the more dominant cultural forces. The recent gender-related theories of preferred modes of processing have created a rationale for acknowledging that women may take a different epistemological approach to validating spiritual experience. (Given 2008,332)

This discussion is limited to the Christian faith tradition, but does not encompass all forms of the tradition. The focus is on conservative Protestant Christian religious contexts where feminine religious freedoms are subject to a convergence of theories of gender, sociology and theology within the ecclesial forms of Christian congregations. A particular notion of being female has been scripted by some conservative Christian writers who have constructed an acceptable form of female participation based upon certain interpretations of Jesus’ interaction with women of his day. Religious conservatism has legitimized a woman’s place in congregational relationships by patronisingly masquerading the liberation of women behind scriptures referring to Jesus’ interaction with selected women in the Bible (Fiorenza 1998) or admirable female role models (Fuchs 2003) without any acknowledgement of the contemporary sociological and gender constructs of Jesus’ time that may or may not be related to the 21st century woman. This is not to deny the grounding of spiritual experience in a biblical perspective; this study remains committed to biblical spirituality in which personal
transcendent experiences may be referenced against biblical exemplars. (Schneiders 2002,134)

Rather, it is a way of acknowledging that feminist theologians have taken a stand against the traditional patriarchally-based interpretations of biblical narratives and the use of women’s experiences to achieve patriarchal goals. They have shone a light upon the experience of women in *their historical context* and Schneiders notes that any attempt to understand those lived experiences reveals that different spiritualities are evident in the Bible because of the variety of circumstances in which God has been intuited. It is the personal nature of spiritual experience in its context which is most illuminative.

With this understanding underpinning the study, the focus is on the lived experience *within* the existential reality of the believer. To take the referents for the construction of femaleness from unconsciously normalized biblical texts that are interpreted from a patriarchal standpoint is to denude the Bible of its variety of experience, and thus its richness, as well as failing to recognise the individual contribution of the women for who they are. Concepts about the category of *femaleness* that are based on biblical exemplars take their first referent as the ancient lived experience of the woman, not the anachronistic theoretical construct used to characterize how the woman *might* have experienced being female.

One outcome of stereotypically-based characterizations of women is an overshadowing or muting of the internalized ability to respond to a call to selfhood that has the capacity to self-validate personal transcendent experiences. Several aspects are affected by this muting of individual capacity and the alienation of an individual’s soul-image from an intimate sense of being fully grounded in God in one’s own right. One significant outcome is the displacement of a personalised faith built upon intimate experiences of the mystery of God by the inability to counter the theologically and sociologically predetermined norms that have evolved for women of faith. The challenge remains for women to reclaim a normative perception of their feminine spirituality that has been shaped by their own spiritual experiences, allowing a re-
visioning of a holistic relationship with God which may differ from the accepted forms of their religious culture.

The author’s impetus for the study arose from being deeply moved by Psalm 18:19 as a metaphor for the process of a spiritual direction encounter:

*He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.*

*(Psalm 18:19 NRSV)*

The writer of the psalm seems to echo the author’s anecdotal evidence of what may be possible in the open space of spiritual direction: a broad and spacious place of hospitality for a deep soul encounter with God. The metaphor provides a framework for describing the faith journey – God drawing the faithful into a broad place free of fear or retribution; re-engaging personal spiritual experiences; validation and embedding of *own truth* about those spiritual experiences that affect changes in identity and faith agency as a result. It is proposed that such a process is transformative and is couched in a relationship of loving Divine attentiveness.

Validating a truly feminine spirituality in women questions how the internal locus of authority is authenticated as the ground of a relationship with God. Consequently, it challenges how women extract themselves from the culturally established belief structures that have prefigured the landscape for exercising their faith. For such validation to be effective, the external environment needs to offer space to vocalise personal transcendent experiences, preferably in the company of someone who can hold the openness of the process and who has a perception of the internal struggle to be empowered to speak out. The stories of women who have experienced such an open space are used here to explore the benefits of spiritual direction for women from conservative faith backgrounds.