

1996

Australian International Conference

Religion Literature & the Arts



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Conference Proceedings

Edited by Michael Griffith and James Tulip

Religion, Literature and the Arts Project

Australian International Conference 1996

Conference Proceedings

(Keynote Addresses And Selected Papers)

Sponsored by

*School of Studies in Religion, Faculty of Arts,
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*Department of Literature and Languages, Faculty of Arts and
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INTRODUCTION

The 3rd International Conference on Religion, Literature and the Arts 1996, held this year at Sancta Sophia College, the University of Sydney, was a great success. Highlights of the conference were:

Karen Armstrong, our keynote speaker from the UK, an ex-nun and author of *A History of God* (1994), gave two strong and very popular papers. Her first, 'Is God the Product of the Creative Imagination?', presented a deeply critical view of Western Christianity; placing this against the world of Islam, Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. She spoke of the excessively theoretical and limiting cast of mind behind Western theology and religious practice; in this context works of the creative imagination, literature and the arts, she argued, could breathe new life and understanding into lifeless dogma. Armstrong was vigorously revisiting and radicalising a theme introduced by David Jasper at our first, 1994, conference in his 'Art and the Biblical Canon' in which he argued that art helps to deconstruct the ossified, authoritative canon and instil a mode of receptivity more in tune with the religious experience embedded in the sacred text. Armstrong's second paper, 'Jerusalem', based on her forthcoming book on this site of three competing monotheistic faiths, took Western Christianity to task for its sense of superiority over Islam, Judaism & Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Here she argued strongly for our need to critique our own position in the light of these other great traditions. She concluded with the suggestion that in the contemporary Western world, atheism was one of the strongest positions for religious growth. Her fervent presentation, coupled with this incendiary content, guaranteed the best media and press coverage that the RLA project has so far received.

Nigel Butterley is the contemporary Australian composer whose whole musical output and personal religious search have been inspired by the sacred in art and literature (William Blake, Kathleen Raine). His 90 minute presentation 'Music as a Meeting Ground for Other Arts & the Religious Quest' helped to bring sharply into focus one of the strongest reasons behind the RLA initiative: its search for the animating interrelationship between religious and creative practice. Butterley's wonderful communicative style helped to bring his audience into contact with the riches of sacred music across a range of traditions. Butterley has been one of our most exciting discoveries and his relationship with RLA promises to be a continuing one.

His presence attracted the largest contingent of composers, musicians and musicologists that has been seen at our conferences so far. We hope this will be a continuing trend.

There is not room here to summarise the content from all the keynote speakers and performers, but all brought rich and vital perspectives on issues in Religion, Literature and the Arts. Our particular thanks to:

David Parker of the Australian Catholic University, for his paper on the Garner controversy and for his lucid presentation of the place and importance of ethics in literary and cultural debate.

Fay Zwicky for her wonderfully animated readings, her poem written specially for the occasion, and her reflections on the place of religion in literature.

Elizabeth Isichei from the University of Otago, who opened up the world of contemporary spirituality in New Zealand through her reflections on the poetry of James Baxter and the art of Colin McCahon.

Al Zolynas from the United States International University, San Diego, for connecting us to the religious search as expressed in contemporary American poetry and for sharing his sense of wonder at being back in this country after 36 years.

Peter Steele from the University of Melbourne, who brought the rich intellectual tradition of the Jesuits into play as he made new for us the religious significance of 'Dante's Longest Journey'.

Frank Moloney of the Australian Catholic University, for his scholarly and strongly supportive launch of the 1995 Proceedings; we thank him for all his efforts to assist the RLA initiative.

Cynthia Winton-Henry and **Phil Porter** from California and **Colin Offord** and **Matthew Doyle** from the Blue Mountains for their provocative challenge to us all, through dance and earthy music, to reconnect our religious search through our senses, with our bodies.

Film maker **Jill Carter-Hansen** and film director **Stephen Cross** for showing us so impressively how the film medium can translate and make immediate and compelling, issues of real religious significance.

Thanks to all the poets, writers, visual artists and musicians who ensured that the conference remained firmly connected to creative practice and didn't lose itself in theorising: Sara Dowse, Rae Desmond Jones, Gerard Windsor, Noel Rowe, Peter Skryznecki, Peter Boyle, Deb Westbury, Marcelle Freiman, Liz Coats, Kate Briscoe, Noelene Lucas, Deborah Durie, Elizabeth Boothby and Gordon Monro.

Thanks also to all the paper-givers who made the conference possible.

Our particular thanks go to Anne-Marie Spencer and all the staff at Sancta Sophia College for helping to make the conference such a success.

Keynote addresses in this year's proceedings have been grouped at the start, followed by conference papers arranged according to the following broad categories:

Focus on Australia

Writing and Religion

Ideologies

Literature, Religion and the Poetic Imagination

Art History and Religion

Visual and Performing Arts

THE RLA PROJECT

This project is responsible for running the annual RLA conference and is also the nerve centre in Australia for the national and international network in the field of Religion, Literature and the Arts.

1996 has seen the establishment of an RLA Internet Web site at <http://www.acu.edu.au/rla>, which will act as a source for information in the field. Close links have also now been established with the Museum of Contemporary Art and its Web site at <http://www.mca.com.au>. This year has also seen the international acceptance of RLA activities with the publication of a special Australian issue of the Oxford Journal *Literature and Theology* (September, 1996) which features some of the best Australian content papers drawn from all three conferences.

The project is currently jointly sponsored and run by Michael Griffith, Department of Literature and Languages, Australian Catholic University, and James Tulip, Head of the School of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney. Michael and Jim are supported by Charlotte Clutterbuck, Hazel Elliot, Elaine Lindsay, Rod Pattenden and Ray Younis. The committee is always on the look out for new hard-working members and new ideas.

The editorial team for these proceedings was drawn from the RLA committee together with the professional assistance of Mark Byrne.

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