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Theology in Australia

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Theology in Australia

Peter Howard

Theology, in Australia's brief history, has been shaped by its colonial origins, the impact of the changing demographics of the Christian population, and the secular strand in Australian history. This article outlines the historical development of theology in Australia, the institutional frameworks which shaped it, and the contours theological thought has currently assumed. The designation 'theology' in what follows refers to Christian theology. The term 'theology', as a 'cluster concept', includes biblical studies, biblical theology, and other terms that are constitutive of this field of knowledge sometimes referred to as 'Religious' or 'Christian Studies' or 'Divinity'. The term 'Protestant' is used in the generally understood way to refer to 'those western European and North American churches which chose to distinguish themselves from Roman Catholicism and maintain their religious independence' (Sherlock 1993: 476). The first section outlines the development of Christian theology in Australia for the first 150 years after European colonization. This occurred largely in denominational contexts, outside though often associated with universities, and was driven by the need to provide clergy to minister to a diverse, multicultural, immigrant society. The second section addresses a confluence of factors in the 'long' 1960s which have contributed to the development of a more confident 'local' theological culture. Section three explores the transition from 'theology produced in Australia' as an accident of residence to a genuinely 'Australian theology' – one that takes account of its historical, social, cultural, and geographic setting. The fourth section explores theologians and currents of theological thought that have emerged since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, while the fifth section addresses the prospect of theology in Australia through a brief discussion of graduate theological research and the new priorities shaping theological discussion.

Keywords: Australian theology, Denominational theology, Ecumenism, Theological education, Secularism, Theological journals, Second Vatican Council

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1 'Theology in Australia': 1850s–1960s

1.1 Contextual overview

From the 1830s until the late 1960s and early 1970s, almost all theological education in Australia took place in denominationally established and funded institutions that sought to extend the reach of the churches from the European home countries. The 'bewildering variety of denominational colleges or seminaries founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by individual churches' (Burns 2021: 266) now participate in theological higher education through sixty-nine colleges grouped into twenty-six Higher Education providers. This multiplicity is key to the diversity that characterizes Australian theology; it is varied in its foundations, derived from and influenced by a range of sources and traditions, both denominational and intellectual, and inflected by the various religious outlooks that have come to be characteristic of the differences between the capital cities of Australian states and territories.

In Australia's relatively brief history since European settlement, the social and institutional location of theology has undergone several marked shifts. Christianity was transported to Australia in the late eighteenth century as part of a larger colonial enterprise, with a disciplining and civilizing mission to what, in its origins, was a penal colony (Shaw 1988; Brett 2019: 85). It was essentially a British transplant with clergy, administrative directives, financial support, architecture, and liturgy, along with sectarian rivalries imported into the 'great south land'. The early convicts and chaplains, and the later free settlers and clergy, had no expectations other than the nostalgic replication of the churches and devotions they remembered in England, Ireland, and Scotland amidst the strangeness of colonial outposts scattered around the coast of a vast continent (Grocott 1980: 218).

Theology, expressed in preaching, teaching, and education – though denominational, derivative, and occupying an ambiguous space in the public sphere – was nevertheless integral to the development of Australia from penal settlement (1788) to commonwealth (1901). Theology was closely linked to the role of religion within the polity in maintaining civil order, the threat posed to that order by sectarianism, the strong connection between theology and the denominational traditions, the need to provide professionally trained clergy, and the values and attitudes of the Enlightenment which informed the development of education (see Gascoigne 2002: 13).

Theologians were preoccupied by denominational rivalries and differing doctrinal stances, controversies regarding 'higher criticism' of the Bible, and perceived threats from advances in the biological sciences. There was also plurality within traditions, such as the Anglican and Lutheran churches, which had practical consequences for ecclesial life, worship, governance, and social outlook. The context for the academic pursuit of theology

lay outside the newly established university system (1850s–1890s), an exclusion which had significant implications for theology’s development.

1.2 European settlement (1788–1850): missionary, pastoral, sectarian

In the earliest phases theology was directed at theological education, driven by the urgent need for recruiting and training clergy for local ministry. The clergy of the early decades of settlement lacked relevant training, experience, and pastoral theology. They not only had to minister to a convict population but also had to engage with Indigenous peoples and a free-settler population struggling with an environment that was often inhospitable (cf. Gladwin 2015). Initially, though, there were few colonial recruits, necessitating a reliance on those from Britain, as well as Germany, Italy, Spain, and France (Breward 1993: 56–57; Grocott 1980: 219). Clergy education, too, was assigned to ‘imported’ scholars. Catholic seminaries were quickly established in each of the colonial cities. Bishop Bede Polding pioneered a small, short-lived seminary in Sydney in 1834. St Patrick’s College, Manly was founded in 1889. Seminaries were founded in Melbourne (1849), near Adelaide at Seven Hills by the Jesuits (1850), in Hobart (1854), and in Brisbane (1863).

In contrast, by 1895–1896, more than a century after European settlement began, there were only four Anglican theological colleges. Bishop William Grant Broughton founded a small divinity school in Sydney in 1846, which was short-lived like that initiated by Polding. Moore College was founded in Sydney in 1856 and destined to become one of the largest theological colleges, setting the firm evangelical foundations characteristic of Anglican culture in Sydney; though ‘Sydney Anglicanism’ and the college’s growth effectively began with Howard Mowll’s appointment as archbishop in 1933 and his appointment of T. C. Hammond as Moore College’s principal three years later in 1936. In Melbourne, Anglican theology centred on Trinity College (1878). St John’s College – colloquially known as ‘poor man’s college’ – was established in Armidale (NSW) in 1898 by Bishop Anthony Green. Unlike Trinity College, no first degree was required for entry, and it was more Anglo-Catholic than Moore College. The visionary warden Ernest Burgmann moved the college to Morpeth in 1925 (see section 1.4). In Adelaide, St Barnabas College was established 1881. In 1891, by a determination of the National Synod of the Church of England in Australia, the Australian College of Theology was established as a ‘national’ body to facilitate local training of clergy and raise their theological and cultural attainments. The main prompts to the foundation of the ACT were the shortage and low quality of local candidates recruited mainly through the readership/catechist schemes. The ACT was first based in Sydney (1896–1927); then Armidale (1927–1944); Sydney again (1945–1961); Melbourne (1961–1974); and then from 1974 in Sydney, where it remains (Treloar 2018). Anglican colleges across Australia proliferated in the fifteen years from 1895 to 1910.

Colonial expansion, denominational competition, and material prosperity served to underscore the need for theological education, though the response was slow (apart from the Catholics, mainly after 1860) and insubstantial. The Church of England enjoyed hegemony until the 1820s–1830s, when this was challenged and effectively disestablished with the arrival of other Christian traditions and their clergy. Though there was some friction in the early colonial years, there was a measure of interdenominational tolerance and active cooperation until the introduction of the 1836 Church Act – first in New South Wales, and then in the other colonies by 1847. This act effectively ‘marked the formal end of Anglican hegemony and the inauguration of religious plurality’ (Rayner 2003: 49). The act provided grants for churches and clergymen of the main denominations wherever settlers raised a minimum contribution themselves, leading to competition for government funding and favours. Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Catholics proselytized and competed for the expansion of clergy, churches, schools, and political involvement. This state aid was withdrawn in the 1860s as colonial governments worked to resolve the type of education that would best serve ‘non-sectarian’ aspirations of governments (Hogan 1987: esp. 48–49 and *passim*; Shaw 1988).

The first Lutheran seminary was started at Lobethal in the Adelaide Hills (1842) where Lutheran refugees from Prussia were settling. In Sydney, for Congregationalists there was Camden College (1864), and, for Presbyterians, St Andrew's (1865). From 1863 until 1914 an Australian Methodist Theological College was located firstly in Silverwater, New South Wales and then from 1881 at Stanmore, New South Wales; in Victoria, Queen's College (founded 1888) became Australasian Methodism's ‘Central Theological Institution’ (1897). This was the home of Queensland Methodist theological education until the establishment of King's College (1912; Trompf 2015: 57).

Though migrants belonging to the various Orthodox traditions had joined ‘the rush to be rich’ on the goldfields of Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850s, Orthodox churches were not being established until the end of the nineteenth century, and the first Orthodox theologate was not founded until 1986. In 1897, joint Greek, Russian, and Syrian Orthodox communities were founded in Sydney and Melbourne. The first Orthodox church – Holy Trinity – was built in Sydney in 1898, and included Greek, Russian, and Syrian worshippers and contributors (i.e. Eastern Orthodox). Soon after, the Church of the Annunciation was established in East Melbourne (1900). While Melbourne and Sydney remained the main centres of Orthodoxy in Australia, the Orthodox liturgies were eventually conducted and churches established in Port Pirie (near Adelaide) in South Australia (1924), in Brisbane (1926, though the first liturgy was celebrated in 1915), and eventually in other capital cities by the end of the 1950s. Waves of migration through the twentieth century further added to the variety of Orthodox traditions with the ‘uniate’ family of churches (those in communion with Rome, viz. Maronites, Melkites, and Ukrainian

Catholics) and the Oriental Orthodox (Armenians, Assyrians, Copts, and Syrians). It could still be claimed at the end of the twentieth century that '[e]ach of the Orthodox churches is in the pioneering phase of lay initiatives, church-building, recruitment of clergy from the homeland, and the slow emergence of Australian-born leaders' (Breward 1993: 158). While Greek Orthodoxy was and remains the strongest Orthodox community in Australia, there was no Orthodox theologate in Australia until 1986, when St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College was established in Sydney.

The strong connection between the teaching of theology and the denominations which founded the particular institutions in which it was taught has meant that theology, during this early period, was constricted to a narrow conservatism and shaped by overseas inclinations. For example, Anglican recruitment tended to follow the conservatism of the home country's Clapham Sect, a group of social reformers with largely evangelical leanings, 'fearful of new knowledge' and 'increasingly rhetorical in preaching' (Shaw 1988: 19). In terms of the approach to, and style of, theology, there was a diversity generated by the founders and exacerbated by the distances between the capital cities of the colony. This was astutely observed by Robert William Dale (1829–1895), a Congregational minister, in his book *Impressions of Australia*. He toured New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia for fifteen weeks in 1857, trying to explain the 'national character' of each of the colonies through observation, data supplied by colonial governments, and interviews. His chapter devoted to 'Religion and Morals' (Dale 1889: ch. 5) begins with a comparison between the religious life of England and that of the colonies. He found less originality than he expected: 'The Churches – all the Churches as far as I could learn – have too faithfully reproduced in new circumstances the customs and institutions of the mother country' (1889: 217). He was interested in the 'drift of theological opinion', which he found varied from colony to colony as he evaluated the relative strength of the different denominations. The spirit of Anglicanism in Sydney was, and remains, more evangelical than the more Anglo-Catholic ethos of Anglicanism in Melbourne, where Catholicism was also strong. Tasmania's religious culture was strongly evangelical. In South Australia, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational Churches, too, created a strong evangelical religious culture. These general inflections in religious culture that Dale identified have continued to characterize the Australian theological landscape to the present day.

1.3 Establishment (1850–1964): secular and sectarian challenges

The ongoing proliferation of theological colleges was due, in part, to the explicit exclusion of Divinity from the curriculum of universities which were founded in the second half of the nineteenth century as colonies gained status as states independent of New South Wales (1850). Unlike many European and American universities, these were secular, not

Christian in their foundation, and theology and religious studies were excluded from the curriculum. The secular, egalitarian, and socially mobile aspirations of a rapidly growing and changing country informed the founding statutes. The University of Sydney's Act of Foundation (1850) opens with: 'it is deemed expedient for the better advancement of religion and morality and the promotion of useful knowledge to hold forth to all classes'; divinity, however, was excluded. By 1881 the University of Melbourne (1853) had the authority to confer degrees in every discipline 'except divinity'. Furthermore, professors at the university were not permitted to be clergy. The defining context was an Australia that, with the advent of self-government, became increasingly secular. The 1872 Education Act regulated that state schools should be 'free, compulsory, and secular', though parents had to pay small fees, compulsion was often avoided and poorly policed, and a form of non-sectarian 'common Christianity' was taught (Grundy 1972: 9, 38). This exclusion of denominationally aligned education was not an anti-religious gesture, but rather an attempt to avoid introducing sectarian tensions (Shaw 1988), as a local newspaper pointed out (*Argus* 1904). In the context of post-Enlightenment rationalism, there was also a widespread belief that 'theology is not a true science [...]' (*Argus* 1910; Sherlock 2016: 217). In addition, the exclusion of divinity also reflected the longstanding resentment at the religious tests required for admission to British and Irish universities prior to the charter granted to the University of London in 1836: the University of Sydney's founding statutes conclude with the injunction that 'no religious test shall be administered to any person in order to entitle him to be admitted as a Student of the said University or to hold any office therein [...]'.

Though the founders of the universities of Sydney and Melbourne excluded theology from fields of study, they nonetheless gave land to the churches for the establishment of denominational residential colleges. The churches not only financed these colleges, but they gave money to the universities to ensure physical propinquity. Colleges also ensured that their academic standards matched those of the universities (Haire 2009). The Sydney and Melbourne pattern of relationship between university and theology was replicated in Adelaide (1874), Tasmania (1890), Queensland (1909), and Western Australia (1911). The proximity of denominational colleges clustered around universities bred collaboration. Considering the historic religious rivalries and sectarian tensions so readily transplanted to foreign soil, the very reason for the exclusion of theology from the university curriculum, this gradual emergence of cooperation in theological education would have been unimaginable in 'the mother country' (cf. Breward 1988: 11). This development would lead readily to the consortia of theological institutes that developed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two attempts to reverse the exclusion of theology from the university were mounted in Melbourne, first in 1892 and then again in 1909, by a lobby group which included the Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterian while Catholics

were content with their own seminaries and international network of colleges and universities. This drive reflected a genuine desire of the churches to participate in Australia's maturation as a nation. In response, the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD), modelled on the University of London, was established in 1910 by the Parliament of Victoria 'to confer degrees, diplomas and certificates in divinity, and to hold examinations for that purpose' (i.e. degrees of Bachelor of Divinity, Master of Theology, and Doctor of Divinity, with the prerequisite of a degree from a recognized university). This parliamentary authority to confer degrees distinguished the MCD from other Australian theological colleges, which were established directly by the churches. The MCD was not yet, however, constituted as a university. Even though there were different drivers amongst the seven Melbourne colleges and the Australian Lutheran College which constituted the MCD, by 1920 theologians of different denominations were working harmoniously (Sherlock 2016: 221; McMullen, Beirne and Carpenter 2015: 223). Notably, a group of evangelical Anglicans resisted being part of the establishment of the MCD. This group initiated the movement to create Ridley College in 1908 as a reaction against Archbishop Lowther Clark's educational policy, particularly his establishment of St John's College in 1906 for non-matriculants. Ridley College was created as an alternative to Trinity and St John's Colleges and aligned itself with the Australian College of Theology rather than with the MCD. Although Ridley was not endorsed by the Melbourne Diocese, there was nonetheless a good deal of cooperation between Ridley College and Trinity College.

By 1914 Anglican, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran theological colleges had sprung up all around Australia. If the exclusion of theology from the universities was intended as a means to inhibit the development of sectarianism, it failed. Instead, it encouraged the development of professionally-oriented educational enclaves, denominationally circumscribed and competing. This, in part, explains the diversity of theologies that developed in Australia.

1.4 Theology in Australia: early currents of theological thought (1850–1950)

Assessments of an Australian contribution to theological inquiry produced in this period were pessimistic and critical, lamenting that the streams of theological thought in Australia ran only one way. Scholars for theological faculties were typically imported from European centres and were often expected to perform parish duties in addition to academic activity. In 1939, George Stuart Watts (1899–1988), first Methodist and then Anglican minister, philosopher, and educator, contributed one of the first surveys and evaluative appraisals of theological thought in Australia. His critique was trenchant: 'The calm of the Australian religious world, unfortunately, is rarely disturbed by the strong breezes of creative theological thought' (Watts 1939: 309). In Watts' view, theological study had not and did not extend beyond preparation for parish ministry. Attempts to approach 'the

mysteries from a fresh angle' were arrested by an evangelical religious fundamentalism in tension with moderate Anglicans, liberal Evangelicals, and liberal Catholics, informed by European thinkers such as George Tyrrell, Friedrich von Hügel, Karl Adam, Karl Barth, and Wilfred Knox. Theological talent was 'invested in apologetics' rather than pure theological research (see Watts 1939: 309–310).

British and European theologians tended to be only transient presences in Australia, bringing with them a variety of theological views but not necessarily producing any lasting impact. One such example was the 'first-rate' (in Watts' view), if controversial, Samuel Angus (1881–1943), an Ulster Scot with a PhD from Princeton who was appointed Professor of Exegetical Theology of the New Testament and Historical Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Hall within St Andrew's College, University of Sydney (1915–1943). Angus was the first to introduce 'liberal theology into Australia' in any influential way (Banks 1976a: 39). Angus was a proponent of what he variously referred to as 'essential Christianity' and 'unitive Christianity', and the importance of reinterpreting the ancient creeds in light of advances in knowledge and the needs of today's world, using rigorous scholarship and applying the scholarly methods of construction of Higher Criticism to the Bible (Ellis-Jones 2010: 3). Concerns over Angus' views on central Christian doctrines, including the Trinity and the inspiration of scripture, led to a charge of heresy, of which he was later acquitted. Of the several important monographs he authored, it was his *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (1925) that gained world attention (see Emilsen 1991).

Watts' lament about the absence of creative theological thought also was true for the Catholic institutions of the period. Seminary educators were generally Roman-trained in the theology of the manual tradition. Thomas Muldoon (1917–1986) was 'probably the only Australian Catholic Theologian to publish extensively outside the pages of Australian or overseas Catholic journals' (Banks 1976b: 9). Like all promising seminarians, he completed his theological education at the Pontifical Urban College of Propaganda Fide so to be acculturated; as a prospective bishop, he went to *Romanità*, staying on to complete a doctorate in theology (1943). On his return to Sydney he was appointed to St Patrick's College, Manly, becoming dean in 1954. He published his lectures on dogmatic theology as *Theologiae Dogmaticae Praelectiones* (Muldoon 1958–1965). Though respectfully reviewed, they did not engage with any of the issues that were then preoccupying European theology in the years leading up to the summoning of the Second Vatican Council (Carmody 2012). By contrast, William Leonard, having completed two doctorates in Rome – one at the Pontifical Biblical Institute – became Professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick's (1939–1961). Very much influenced by the new approaches to scripture encouraged by papal authorization for the use of critical methods in biblical scholarship (Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* 1893 and Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* 1943), he was

the key figure behind the emergence of a vital biblical scholarship in Catholic circles in Australia from the 1950s onwards (cf. Banks 1976a: 41).

There was, however, significant theological writing and engagement with the ideas generated by debates occurring overseas among the Protestant traditions, even if this writing had little impact beyond Australia's shores. William Binnington Boyce (1804–1889), in Australia from 1846 as general superintendent of the Wesleyan mission in Australia, published his 473-page *The Higher Criticism and the Bible: A Manual for Students* (1881). While admitting the weakness of its 'subjectivity', 'the freedom from the wholesome restraints of the older school of criticism is one main source of the power of the new school to excite and interest the literary mind of the age', though it is generally at odds with the 'received opinions of the churches' (Boyce 1881: 4). His other important book is the even more lengthy *Introduction to the Study of History* (1884, 674 pages), a theological reading of world history which attempts to align the historical periodizations of the ancient world with the biblical, as well as attempting to address Darwin's ideas of evolution with biblical understandings of the initial unity and subsequent dispersion of the human race (Boyce 1884: 1–15 and *passim*):

Believing in the revelation given to our race, recorded in the book of Genesis, the writer of this work attaches no importance to recent speculations by which that revelation has been ignored or contradicted, but the fact of sundry theories, opposed to the biblical account, and the discussion of these theories, require to be noticed. (Boyce 1884: 14)

Engagement with the ideas generated within debates occurring overseas, especially the British Isles, is also evident in the educational and published legacy of three successive principals of Moore College. Each brought about changes in the evangelicalism taught at the college, which flowed into the Sydney archdiocese more broadly. Reformation evangelicalism, premillennial disposition, and the Keswick holiness of Nathaniel Jones (1897–1911) gave way to the broadened self-designated liberal evangelicalism of David John Davies (1911–1935). The Irish Anglican Thomas Chatterton Hammond (1936–1953) reset the firm Reformation, centrist evangelical foundations of the college (see McIntosh 2018: 163). Before his appointment to Australia, Hammond had already been active in rebutting the theologically liberal movement among evangelicals, as, for example, in his penetrating critique 'The Evangelical Revival and the Oxford Movement' (Hammond 1933). Five of his eight major books were produced or completed after his appointment to Moore College in 1935. His 198-page doctrinal handbook, *In Understanding Be Men* (1936), began by addressing methodology, deductive systematic/dogmatic theology, and inductive biblical theology, before treating all areas of doctrine, including areas of conflict within the spectrum of evangelicalism such as various forms of liberal theology on scripture and how to understand the atonement. It went through five editions and multiple reprints over

more than thirty years. His last book, *The New Creation* (1953), was arguably his crowning contribution to evangelical systematic theology. While based on his own careful exegesis, the book encouraged readers to consider the interpretations of passages of scripture of the different schools of thought, including liberal, Roman Catholic, and Anglo-Catholic. His purpose was not only to instruct but also to rebut such other views (McIntosh 2018: 153–154). A powerful and witty speaker, the influence of Hammond's theological thought through his public lectures was significant and widespread, not only in his own diocese of Sydney but also in Melbourne and at national conferences.

Also significant for Anglican theological thought in New South Wales and Australia more broadly was Ernest Burgmann (1885–1967), warden of St John's College first at Armidale (1918–1925) and then Morpeth (1925–1934) after its relocation, for which he was largely responsible. Burgmann went on to be Bishop of Canberra (1934–1950), earning the epithet 'Red Bishop' through his commitment to social justice and reform. His theological, ecclesial, and national vision was wide and embracing, and animated his voice in the public sphere. Strongly Anglo-Catholic in the broad Anglican tradition rather than evangelical in his views (a sacramentalist who acknowledged the power of God in creation), he was committed to decolonizing the church which he believed should be

a church with an Australian temperament, striking a distinctive note for the formation of national character, seeing the country in her strategic position in the alignment of the nations of the world, forming the soul and providing the energy for the creation of a national culture, a culture that will create those insights which will make Australia a great beacon light of Christian civilisation in these Southern Seas.

It was this national vision that Burgmann sought to imbue in the clergy educated at St John's College. This vision extended to his founding of the short-lived *The Morpeth Review* (1927–1934), envisaged for those 'on the borderland of institutional religion', with prominent commentators on economics, anthropology, religion, and current affairs. As one who lamented the very limited teaching of theology at Australian universities, he endeavoured to sharpen the intellectual edge of clergy as part of a life-long passion for education. He would go on to be influential at The Morpeth Conference (1966, see section 3.3). His publications, mainly essays and booklets, were prolific, encompassing education (including the autobiographical *Education of an Australian*, 1944), social reform, religion in society (e.g. *Religion in the Life of the Nation*, 1930), and interpretations of scripture (e.g. *Jesus and God*, 1932). He conceptualized his vision and translated it into the establishment of St Mark's Anglican Memorial Library in Canberra (1957) as the setting for the development of a distinctive Australian theology. Undergoing several transformations, as St Mark's National Theological Centre (see section 3.3) it enshrines Burgmann's vision which he voiced as 'an institution which would become like a permeable

membrane between the church and the university work done in a secular city' (<https://stmarks.edu.au/about/history>; cf. Hempenstall 1993a; 1993b).

In the feisty atmosphere of 'free thinking' Melbourne, the second Anglican bishop, James Moorhouse (1826–1915, bishop 1877–1886), was influential in shaping the theological ethos of the city, including addressing the issues raised by science for Christian belief. He was eloquent and inaugurated an annual series of public lectures at Melbourne's Town Hall. His work tackled the christological and scientific issues of the day, and though he was only in Australia for ten years, his liberal theological views helped shape the development of Trinity College and the education of Anglican clergy in Victoria. The substance of his theological thinking can be gleaned from a number of important books he authored during his career, including *Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Subject of Growth in Wisdom* (1866, lectures given in Cambridge), *The Expectation of the Christ* (1878), *The Teaching of Christ* (1891), *Dangers of the Apostolic Age* (1891), and *Church Work: Its Means and Methods* (1894).

Further examples from this period centre on the Presbyterians' Ormond College. J. Laurence Rentoul (1846–1926), lecturer and the professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Criticism, New Testament Greek, and Christian Philosophy, published *The Early Church and the Roman Claims*, a series of four lectures in which he entered 'for the first time in [his] life, into controversy with Roman Catholic advocates' – a reply to Melbourne's Catholic Archbishop Carr on the 'primacy of the Roman Pontiff' (Rentoul 1896: 5). The book ran into six editions. Andrew Harper (1844–1936), an Oriental linguist and Old Testament scholar also at Ormond College, excited controversy for his critical approach to scripture and his public lectures on 'Higher Criticism' (Chambers 1983). Though a fine scholar, his publications were few and included *The Book of Deuteronomy* in the *Expositor's Bible* series (1895) and an essay on 'The Song of Solomon' in *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (1902).

1.5 Towards enculturation: theology and the pulpit

From the 1830s to the First World War, theological literature in Australia generally took the form of printed sermons, lectures, and addresses, or reports of these in the daily newspapers. An evangelical Anglican newspaper, the *Australian Church Record*, first published in 1880 as *The Church Record*, spread and nourished the evangelical tradition that characterized the Anglican Church in New South Wales. In 1895 *The Australasian Catholic Record* (ACR) was launched with the polemical and apologetic 'task of confronting the enemies of the church, "Irreligion, Immorality and Anarchy"' (Cooper 2018: 330) but was nonetheless 'a theological journal with more serious intellectual pretensions, and more extended theological contributions were occasionally in evidence' (Banks 1976a: 37). After nineteen years, ACR ceased publication but was revived again in 1924 to

provide the Catholic Church in Australia and New Zealand with ‘a permanent organ to deal with its domestic problems, to enshrine its history, to reflect its learning, to help its clergy in the pulpit and confessional’ (editorial, quoted in Cooper 2018: 332). The sermon was the most significant vehicle of language and ideas in the public arena in colonial Australia (Damousi 2010: 70–75).

At least two million sermons were preached in Australia from 1830 to 1890 (Lake 2018: 116). Pulpit oratory engaged the intellectual culture of the day (Gladwin 2014: 6–8). Theologies of providence and prayer, for example, were argued in the context of challenges to revealed religion posed by proponents of reason and science, along with the latest British and North American scholarship (‘higher criticism’) and its implications for biblical authority and Protestant faith especially, including the humanity and divinity of Christ, atonement and original sin, and eschatology. ‘Creation’ was freely discussed as local ministers wrestled with the theological implications of Darwin’s theories of evolution (Beward 1993: 93–94). Some of the most influential theologians of the day populated city church pulpits rather than colleges. Among Congregationalists, there was James Jefferis (1833–1917; see Phillips 1972) and Llewelyn David Bevan (1842–1918; see Gunson 1979); among Baptists, Frank William Boreham (1871–1959; McLaren 1979); among Methodists, Alan Walker (1911–2003; Gill 2003); and among Presbyterians, the controversial Charles Strong (1844–1942; Badger 1976), who in 1884 broke away from the Presbyterian Church and established the Australian Church. All were scholars in their way and were often considered to be on the fringe of their traditions for liberal views which sought to connect theology with everyday life as they encountered it in Australia.

The development of preaching does show a concern to engage an experience very different to that of the northern hemisphere. In the preface to a published collection of his sermons, Arthur Vincent Green (1857–1944) – the Anglican Bishop of Ballarat and the founder of two theological colleges (St John’s in Armidale, NSW, see [section 1.2](#); and later St Aiden’s, Ballarat, Victoria) – comments that sermon collections originating from the United Kingdom refer to seasons which are ‘inverted’ and have ‘allusions [that] are not always appropriate’. By contrast, ‘[i]llustrations and references tell tenfold when they strike a note familiar to the country in which we live’. Green’s sermons were shaped by context:

His forty-four sermons, for some part, are associated with special occasions. Others are addressed to particular classes among the congregations. They have all been preached to country congregations in Australia, ‘some in country towns, large or small; some in tiny bush settlements; some in shearing-sheds; some in State schools; some beneath the shade of great gum-trees’. (Anonymous 1914: 268–269)

2 Towards an ‘Australian theology’: institutional frameworks (1960s–)

2.1 Higher education policy developments and theology (1960–2000)

In the 1960s, the institutional framework for theology that had been established by the early twentieth century began to shift due to ecclesial and governmental developments. The 1960s–1970s saw the union of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists, forming the Uniting Church in Australia, while the two Lutheran churches in Australia also united. Ecumenism, under the impetus of the World Council of Churches and Roman Catholicism’s Second Vatican Council, was actively pursued between the different Protestant traditions and the Catholic Church in Australia (see section 2.3, below). This ecumenical climate led to a dramatic reversal in government policy which had, from the outset, excluded academic theology from the universities.

The publication of the report of the Government Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia (Martin 1964) was a watershed moment for the institutional contexts for the pursuit of theology in Australia. It highlighted not only the link between tertiary education and economic growth, but also the importance of diversity and included a chapter (chapter fifteen) on theological training. This chapter (and the report generally) was highly significant for two reasons: (1) it led to state government accreditation of non-university degrees; and (2) it recommended universities embrace ‘theological education’ (as distinct from ‘theological training’, which was still to be the province of the churches), which encompassed ‘comparative religion, theological (including biblical) history, early specialist languages for the understanding of manuscript material and original texts, classical languages and literature, ancient history and archaeology’ (Martin 1964: 148 [vol. 2]). It also noted, importantly, that ‘the climate is now favourable for theological studies at the universities and that the cordial co-operation of all denominations has removed an obstacle that hitherto has caused hesitation on the part of university governing bodies’ (Martin 1964: 148 [vol. 2]).

The Martin Report and, later, the Dawkins Report (1988), transformed configurations of theological interaction and teaching. As the Martin report noted, developments in ecumenism in the 1950s and 1960s amongst Protestant traditions and Roman Catholicism, given impetus by the World Council of Churches and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, opened up new possibilities of cooperation within new degree frameworks. A 1965 conference at the Melbourne College of Divinity led to renewed efforts to entice the Catholics into the College, initiatives hailed receptively (Beirne 2010). Soon after, Catholic Theological College, Yarra Theological Union, and the Jesuit Theological College (which in 1969 had joined the theological colleges of the Anglican,

Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches to form the United Faculty of Theology in order to pool their teaching and library resources) joined the Melbourne College of Divinity, so enabling the conferral of the newly approved state degrees of Bachelor of Theology and Doctor of Theology. In this sense, the Martin Report was an important driver that led to the reorganization of the MCD, including the amendment of its Act by the Victorian Parliament and the approval of the Bachelor of Theology degree (1972) – ‘the first such award permitted in Australia’ (Sherlock 2009). The Australian College of Theology originally sought to collaborate with the MCD in the awarding of the new degrees but after the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, Sir Frank Woods, withdrew support for the project, the ACT moved to Sydney where it obtained approval from the Anglican General Synod for a Bachelor of Theology degree which was subsequently accredited by the NSW Higher Education Board. The availability of this degree enabled the ACT to become an ecumenical consortium of Protestant colleges in the later 1970s and 1980s.

In the wake of the Martin Report and on the model of the ‘new’ MCD, a number of new ecumenical, multi-college theological education providers sprang up around the country with their new church and/or university links (Sherlock 2009): Adelaide (1979), Brisbane (1983), Sydney (1983), and Perth (1985). Through these consortia, from the 1970s and 1980s, theological colleges across the country were able to access the university system: the University of Queensland BD; the Adelaide College of Divinity/Flinders University of South Australia; Perth College of Divinity/Murdoch University; Brisbane College of Theology/Griffith University; the University of Sydney; the Sydney College of Divinity (SCD); and Charles Sturt University. In some sense, SCD is an outlier among the ecumenical consortia in that it was never incorporated into a university (though it does today maintain an agreement with Macquarie University for the promotion of Coptic studies). Until recently SCD also differed from the Australian College of Theology (Anglican) and the MCD (Anglican, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Catholic, and Uniting) in that it is subject to no direct ecclesial oversight. Moore Theological College (Sydney) is similarly an outlier. Founded in 1856 to prepare evangelically minded clergy, resistant to both ‘rationalism and ritualism’, it is the theological training seminary of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney with the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney *ex officio* as the president of its council, so placing it under direct ecclesial oversight – contrasting with St John’s College, Morpeth, which was lay controlled. Though the largest Anglican seminary, Moore College is an anomaly in the emerging Australian higher education sector since it is not a member of a consortium but a standalone university college. The third outlier is the Catholic Institute of Sydney, succeeding St Patrick’s College, Manly. This, the oldest Catholic major seminary in Australia (founded in 1889), was in 1954 granted the right to award pontifical theology degrees. In 1976, the Faculty was renamed the Catholic Institute of Sydney (CIS). It is now a partner institution of the University of Notre Dame, Australia.

Recently, the Pentecostal Alphacrucis College, Moore College, the Australian College of Theology, and the Sydney College of Divinity have become accredited university colleges, and the Seventh Day Adventist Avondale College is now an accredited private university (see section 2.2).

Theology, as a consequence of the Martin Report, now had a place in public education. A large proportion of theological students could therefore avail themselves of government funding (Austudy and Abstudy in 1992; fee-help in 2003), which in turn facilitated a growing trend of laity undertaking theological studies, but not primarily as a path to ordained professional ministry. Across the country, there was increasingly an opportunity for theology to be nourished by the broader intellectual life of the university which hitherto had not been possible. Furthermore, the new prospects and administrative frameworks entailed oversight by government agencies. This had an impact not only on issues of accreditation but also on the quality of education delivered by theological colleges across the country.

Even before the government's policy reversal, universities did not entirely exclude themselves from theological studies. Despite the founding statutes, as the twentieth century progressed, several universities were delivering theology in the form of religious studies, history, archaeology, and semitic studies. The first theological inroads into the universities came with the introduction, variously, of biblical and semitic studies, church history, scholastic philosophy, and Bachelor of Divinity second degrees at Sydney, Melbourne, and Queensland (from 1937, Martin 1964: 148; Franzmann 2002). However, '[n]one of these courses attracted enough students to make any significant cultural impact' (Treloar 2009: 36).

While the MCD's Bachelor of Theology degree was perhaps the most important fruit of the Martin Report, there were others. The report also led to the establishment of theology, divinity, or religious studies courses at the 'new' universities of La Trobe, Macquarie, Newcastle, Flinders, Griffith, Deakin, Murdoch, and later Monash and then Sydney, demand for which would soon be met by new ecumenical consortia. In the increasingly democratized context of post-Dawkins universities, theology was pursued by students not necessarily affiliated with any particular religious faith, if any. This challenged the pedagogical assumptions of theological education (cf. Fleming, Lovat and Douglas 2015: 30).

The aspiration of establishing theology as a core discipline of the local multi-disciplinary academy, inspired by the opportunities opened up by the Martin Report, can be illustrated by the 'Newcastle Model'. Following a conference at St John's College, Morpeth (The Morpeth Conference), the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle undertook several initiatives to move theological education away from diocesan controlled theological colleges in

the Anglican Church of Australia into the mainstream curriculum of public universities. Following the sale of St John's College, Morpeth, and an ill-fated affiliation with Charles Sturt University (1997–2002), the diocese implemented the 'Newcastle Model' in 2007–2008, establishing a chair and providing funds for essential staff for a theological programme at the University of Newcastle. There was to be 'no separation of duties or franchise arrangement' in 'the way that theology functions'. It was to be 'as much part of the everyday life of the University as any other discipline' (Douglas and Lovat 2010: 83). Though its promoters evidently had high hopes – and for a time succeeded, even bringing on the Broken Bay Institute in 2012 – the programme has since closed.

Catholic higher education institutions also developed in the new context occasioned by the Martin Report. The University of Notre Dame (located in Fremantle from 1986–1991, then expanded to Broome in 1992 and Sydney in 2006') began as a private university. Australian Catholic University (1991, now with seven Australian campuses and one in Rome) evolved from a number of vocational colleges (teaching and nursing) to become a state-funded, public university. These institutions' nature as 'comprehensive' institutions – as well as the differences in Catholic identity between them – can be seen in the place they have given to theology in their 'core' curricula. This meant that students of all disciplines engaged with theology, mimicking the role of theology in the university common in Europe and in some universities in the USA. The prospect of theology in a public university in a radically secular or religiously indifferent society such as Australia has provoked significant intellectual engagement without slipping into the religious studies versus theology debate (see Horner and Tucker 2012; Fleming, Lovat and Douglas 2015). In 2009, the Australian Catholic University (ACU) established a Faculty of Theology and Philosophy (into which was absorbed the School of Philosophy and Theology) with a specific mandate to pursue learning, teaching, and research for a deepened understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition and the application of that understanding to discourses regarding the contemporary world, its challenges, and its opportunities. ACU continues to be the only public university in Australia with a dedicated Faculty of Theology.

2.2 Further higher education policy developments and theology (2003–)

The development of theological institutions and education in Australia has continued to be strongly influenced, if not shaped, by government policy. The 2008 Bradley Review established a national register of Higher Education Providers, the possibility of self-accreditation for non-universities, and benchmarks for Institutes of Higher Education, University Colleges, and universities of specialisation (McIver 2018). To be a 'university of specialisation', there has to be research (creation of new knowledge) and scholarship (dissemination of knowledge) in all broad fields in which coursework degrees are offered. As a result of this review, the MCD again led the way and sought and gained the

status of Australia's first university of specialisation as the University of Divinity (2012), encompassing thirteen colleges (McMullen, Beirne and Carpenter 2015) including the Coptic Orthodox Church's St Athanasius College (since 2011). Avondale College (affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church) became a university of specialisation (2021), while subsequently Moore Theological College, the Australian College of Theology, the Sydney College of Divinity, and Alphacrucis College (developed from The Commonwealth Bible College and Harvest Bible College) advanced in this direction by being granted university college status. For Alphacrucis College, the underlying motive was well caught by its public statement on achieving its new status: 'Our vision is to ultimately be a global Christian university, transforming neighbourhoods and nations. This decision takes us one step closer towards that goal'. It also wants to grow: 'there are 125 million Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians in the Asia-Pacific alone, with no Pentecostal universities. We hope this new category will help Australian faith-based higher education institutions engage with new educational markets within our regional environment' (quoted in Matchett 2022). There is now serious scholarship from a Pentecostal perspective to transform theological education and to challenge traditional approaches (Austin and Perry 2015), as well as a journal – *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*, published by Alphacrucis – established in 1999 with the goal of promoting Pentecostal/Charismatic scholarship in the Asia-Pacific region.

The implementation of the various government policies on accreditation and performance standards coincided with the dismantling of colleges of theology/divinity in Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, and Newcastle (this was also due to changing demand and demographics, shifting ecclesial interests including theological and ministry tensions, the clergy sex abuse crisis, and moderation of enthusiasm for ecumenism as well as a desire to reassert denominational identity). Other institutions were at risk of not meeting university category standards (Coaldrake 2019). Dedicated religion departments and centres struggled to maintain viability at universities such as Sydney, Queensland, Monash, Deakin, and Newcastle. By 2020, all had been disestablished, though various elements of constituent disciplines have been subsumed under other areas of study and research.

A significant driver for the direction of theological research was the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), a new quality framework established by the federal government (Labor) in 2008 (disestablished in 2023) replacing the Research Quality Framework (RQF) of the previous government (Conservative coalition). Among the suite of indicators for research excellence, one of the key measures was the ranking of scholarly journals. The imperative for institutions was to have their researchers publish in highly ranked overseas journals. This had implications for Australian theological journals which found it more difficult to attract high quality local content since the journals were not regarded as sufficiently prestigious for institutions to gain rankings 'well above world standard' (5) or 'above world standard' (4). This also meant that more and more articles were more likely to be designed to seek international recognition and to qualify as 'theology produced in Australia', rather

than 'Australian Theology' (see [section 3](#) below). Important journals that had been established to address the latter (e.g. *Pacifica* and *Compass Theological Review*) were eventually discontinued by 2018, signalling a risk that research priorities may be driven by the quest for funding opportunities rather than by 'casual curiosities' (Brett 2019: 90) and a genuinely Australian theology addressing the local context.

2.3 Theological institutions, ecumenism, and new intellectual currents (1972–)

From the outset up until the 1950s–1960s, theology and theological education in Australia had close ties with overseas theological faculties and colleges in Britain, Europe, and America. This brought approaches and debates to Australia. In the 1950s, theological colleges across the Anglican, Catholic, and Reformed traditions were beginning to introduce students to the newer theological scholarship emerging in Britain (e.g. St Andrews, Cambridge, London, Manchester, Nottingham, and Oxford) and in European faculties (e.g. Basel, Göttingen, Leuven, and Tübingen).

The 1960s marked a distinct turning point in the approaches taken to theology, both in the writings of theologians and in the way theology was coming to be conceived as a more dynamic process where its epistemological basis shifted from objective knowledge to the knowing subject that is historically, geographically, and culturally emplaced. Grappling with the question of what theology or 'doing' theology contextualized in Australia might mean was closely linked to more general questioning about what it meant to be a postcolonial society independent of European origins and how the nation was responding and should respond to unresolved questions about relations with Aboriginal culture. Religious diversity, which had been part of the colonial heritage, expanded significantly with waves of migration following the Second World War, the dismantling of the White Australia Policy, and intensified by political convulsions in Europe and Southeast Asia (especially the Vietnam War): Britain, Ireland, China, Italy, Greece, Malta, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Mauritius, Vietnam, Chile, and so on. Australia's ethnic diversity was recognized and enshrined as 'multiculturalism' by an act of the Federal Parliament (Racial Discrimination Act 1975). The diversity of immigrants brought with them their variations of religious traditions, practices, expectations, and aspirations. By the twenty-first century, it is no longer possible to speak of Australia as a Christian country. Though various strands of Christianity are professed by close on 43.9% of Australians (2021 census), other world religions and non-religious world views contribute to the country's religious ethos (Islam 3.2%; Hinduism 2.7%; Buddhism 2.4%; Sikhism 0.8%; Judaism 0.4%; No Religion 38.9%). Not only this plurality of religious traditions, but also recognition of plurality within established traditions – Reformed (including Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian), Anglican (Anglo- and evangelical), Orthodox (Eastern, Oriental, and Uniate), and Roman Catholic alike – have had an impact on theological thought,

if only by intensifying fundamental questions about the nature of truth (is truth plural?), salvation (are there many roads to salvation?), and underlying unity in diversity (cf. Rayner 2003: 46–47).

A confluence of factors in the 1960s generated a burgeoning of theological inquiry in a context where Australia was experiencing religious unsettlement similar to that occurring in Europe and North America (Hilliard 2002). Theological shifts overseas significantly influenced Australian churches and clergy especially with a re-appraisal of ecclesiology, accelerated by a crisis in ordained ministry and the churches' changing attitudes to social issues, and a questioning of the relevance and authority of traditional institutions and formulations of belief. The theological writings of Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, Hans Küng, Karl Rahner, and Jürgen Moltmann, as well as documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the World Council of Churches, accentuated the fundamental importance of 'the whole people of God' (Breward 1993: 174). At the moment when (1) denominational distinctions and associations were evolving under the impact of such new theological currents and ecumenical imperatives, and (2) ministerial education of clergy was transitioning to formation of a theologically literate laity, shifts in government policy reversed the previous exclusion and brought theological institutions into the tertiary system. This offered the possibility of better resourcing and access to funding.

A further factor influencing theology and theological education in this period was the increasing postcolonial awareness of the impact of colonization and the missionary endeavours of the churches that accompanied it. This awareness led to initiatives to support the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women in church and community leadership. In 1973, Nungalinga College was established in Darwin by an ecumenical consortium to bring together the Aboriginal people of Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Uniting churches for certificate-level theological qualifications (if not degrees as such), with educational programmes that explore Christian faith contextually. Similar aspirations led to the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Uniting Churches establishing Wontulp Bi-Buya College in Cairns (Queensland) in 1983. The college closed in July 2024.

Despite access to better funding and resources, institutional configurations remained unstable, with colleges changing their affiliations with universities or other consortia or even ceasing to operate. Several struggled to meet the university category standards. These decades also saw serious reflection on the nature of theology in Australia – what is an Australian theology? – as well as the relationship between theology and religious studies. There was also (and continues to be) anxiety around the ambiguity of theology (and religion in the public domain more generally) in the Australian context. This ambiguity in relation to theology's status, and what is perceived more generally to be a secular bias, was reflected by the disappearance of theology as an area of research when it was subsumed into the 'interdisciplinary bubble' of religious studies in the Australian

Research Council's revision of Research Codes (2008; see Possomai, Long and Counted 2021). Rather than simply attributing this development to a secular bias, a nuanced view should also take account of the emergence of the sociological study of Australian religion pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s by Hans Mol at the Australian National University and pursued by his successors in the following decades (e.g. Bruce Wilson, Douglas Hynd, Alan Black, Gary Bouma, Philip Hughes, Peter Kaldor, and Ruth Powell). Due to shifts in the status of theology in the recent decade and advocacy from the Council of Deans of Theology, theological research was restored as a separate code in 2021.

It is little wonder then that in the last decades of the twentieth century until the present day, the changing nature of theology in Australia has come under increasing scrutiny from within the academy itself, with essays reflecting on theology's methods, audience (increasingly secular and sceptical), and future as a discipline. Anxiety about how structurally and culturally the Australian educational and research environment has stimulated and sustained theological reflection generated assessments of the sources, commitments, engagement, purpose, and direction of the field in the face of pressing questions caused by critical examination of Australia's colonial past, the treatment of the First Peoples, and an ongoing grappling with the character of the country's distinct cultural and religious identity (e.g. Banks 1976a; 1976b; Osborn 1979; Hamilton 1988; Goosen 2000; Bouma 2006).

The first comprehensive, ecumenical study of theological education in Australia, *Uncovering Theology* (Sherlock 2009), was followed by a range of studies analysing theology's shifting contexts, funding support, economic impact (see especially Oslington 2014; 2020; Oslington, Jensen and Ryan 2019; Possomai, Long and Counted 2021), and educational and research contribution (e.g. Piggin 1997; Hudson 2016; Treloar 2009; 2023; Harding 2018; McIver 2018), as well as new approaches (Trompf 2004) and ongoing challenges (Boer 2012; Brett 2019; Burns 2021). These increasingly frequent essays on the state of theology in Australia as a trajectory of its development reflect a constant anxiety about not only the way theology is pursued and the nature of theology itself, but also the changed context in which Christian theology 'competes with other perspectives and systems of belief to determine how Australian society and culture will develop' (Treloar 2009: 32). What is notable with the more recent appraisals of theology in terms of method and content is that different denominational traditions and settings are conflated to distinguish only between Protestant and Catholic, and even that distinction has largely disappeared in twenty-first-century reviews of the state of the discipline.

2.4 Associations, libraries, and journals

The changed social, cultural, and religious climate of the mid-twentieth century led to the formation of several theological and biblical studies associations and several new

journals, creating new opportunities to confer across traditions, interests, and methods. Of these, the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS) was avowedly ecumenical, aiming to promote contemporary theological inquiry and teaching 'conversant and engaged with a rapidly changing world', encouraging 'theologically astute representations to government, churches and other bodies on matters of broad socio-political, and ecclesial, concern' (ANZATS website). As a lobbying body, it was replaced in the late 1990s by the Council of Deans of Theology (founded 1997), representing fourteen institutions plus the President and Executive Officer of ANZATS, with the similar aims of encouraging and enhancing quality learning and teaching, research, and research training in a spirit of academic freedom within member institutions.

Associations and journals, along with theological libraries, have served to foster intellectual and scholarly networks across denominational and discipline silos, both intellectual and scholarly, especially since the advent of the emerging open ethos of the 1960s. They also serve to indicate the richness and varied groups that constitute the diverse intellectual life that has been emerging in Australia (Burn 2020). For example, *The Lutheran Theological Journal* was the first initiative when the Lutheran churches came together in 1966, serving the professional growth of pastors and teachers, and communicating 'contemporary theological trends throughout the world and with important church developments' (quoted in Osborn 1979: 3).

The Martin Report, in particular, heralded the creation of key associations, societies, and conferences. Among them, the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Studies (ANZATS) became important as an ecumenical forum, as a national (later Trans-Tasman) network for scholars in small theological schools spread around the country, and 'as a semi-official accrediting agency' making representations to government on their behalf. It assumed responsibility for the journal *Colloquium* (1967) when the Australian and New Zealand Society for Theological Studies (ANZSTS, founded in 1966) dissolved. *Colloquium* was one of Australia's first journals devoted not to 'churchmanship' but 'scholarship' (Foster 1967: 95; Treloar 2009: 41).

New directions in biblical studies led to the Fellowship of Biblical Studies on the initiative of University of Melbourne professor of Semitic Studies Maurice Goldman to promote research and discussion on biblical and related subjects by providing a forum for domestic and international scholars, organizing conferences, holding public meetings to disseminate research findings, publishing the *Australian Biblical Review*, producing books and other media, and otherwise encouraging scholarship. It was, again, strongly ecumenical in focus, with two Jewish scholars among the handful of founding members.

The Australian/Australasian Theological Forum (ATF) is Methodist in inspiration but strongly ecumenical with representatives of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic,

and Uniting Churches on its founding board. ATF's publications and the *Australasian Theological Forum Theological Book Prize* have emerged as a significant barometer of theology produced in Australia (see [section 4.2](#) below). Other strong associations include the Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA, 1975); Australian Catholic Biblical Association (ACBA, 1964); Christian Research Association (CRA, 1973); the Australian Association for the Study of Religion (AASR, 1972); and the Religious History Association (RHA, 1959). All have similar aims in terms of promoting quality research and scholarly interaction.

The Indigenous voice in theological development has come through the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship of Australia (AEF). Formed in 1970 and incorporated in 1992, it is a Christian interdenominational body aiming to encourage Aboriginal Christians through fellowship, discipleship, and leadership development.

Women Scholars of Religion and Theology (WSRT), established in 1991 and open to all women studying or working in theology in the Asia-Pacific, is committed to facilitating networks among women who are working, studying, teaching, researching, writing, and interested in religion and theology. From 2001 to 2016, it published its own journal, *SeaChanges*. It is a significant contribution to the effort to foreground and connect women scholars (Wainwright 2004; McPhillips 2002: 87–90).

Also giving voice to another sector of theology in Australia is *Phronema*, the peer-reviewed journal of Sydney's St. Andrews' Greek Orthodox Theological College. Key Orthodox authors in terms of frequency of publication have been Archbishop Stylianos (1990s), John Chryssavgis (1990s), Philip Kariatlis (2000–2010s), Doru Costache (2010s), and Mario Baghos (2010s). Other contributors who have been especially prolific over time have included Guy Freeland (1990s), James Athanasou (2000s), and Andrew Mellas (2010s). With regard to thematic matter, authorial interest has been especially high in treating the historical periods 30–600 and 600–1500, the person and work of Jesus, the saints Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, and the history of doctrine on [theological anthropology](#), salvation, creation, and the Trinity, extending more recently to apophatic theology and [ecotheology](#).

3 'Australian theology': in search of method

3.1 Theology in Australia and Australian theology

What is 'theology in Australia'? Theology 'in Australia' has commonly been taken to mean theology 'produced in Australia' and, until recent decades, generally reflected the ties and priorities of theological educators and scholars with the institutions and authorities of their advanced training overseas. The streams of theological thought ran one way. Reviewing the history of theology from 1915 to 1965 in Australia from the vantage point of 1976, the

evangelical Anglican biblical scholar and practical theologian Robert Banks observed: 'there has been, almost uniformly, a notable lack of serious intellectual interest in, or understanding of, distinctively Australian attitudes, values and culture, and a consequent lack of theological appreciation and critique of them' (Banks 1976b: 13). This is to again confront the question of the slow maturation of theology in Australia perhaps explained by the nation's perennial trait of 'cultural cringe' (Phillips 1950; Hesketh 2013) with theology regarded as 'a source of embarrassment within the Australian conversation' (Garrett 1995: 2; Thornhill 1992: 181).

Serious engagement with the quest for an Australian theology was signalled when in 1978 the three new Australian theological associations (ANZSTS, AASR, and ANZATS – see [section 2.4](#)), sponsored a series of workshops on 'Toward Theology in an Australian Context' and confronted the intellectual methods and assumptions of 'imported' Western theology, including assumptions of a static world, the neutrality of knowledge and the knower, and, fundamentally, theology's primarily explanatory purpose (Hayes 1979). The essential question now being posed was: what constitutes theology in Australia? The answer could no longer simply be 'theology done in Australia'; it had to be 'Australian theology' (cf. Garrett 1995: 2). There was growing awareness of the need to engage the diversity of religious traditions that continued to accompany new waves of immigration, the significance of Australia's geographical location in the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of the Global South, and, above all, the cultural realities and traditions of Australia's First Peoples. The arrival of literary studies in the 1980s and postcolonial studies in the 1990s began to influence the approach to biblical texts, as well as the stances and commitments of theologians. Scholars were posing a range of questions: how are commitments to wider society, tradition, and church to be prioritized (cf. Tracy 1981)? How can theology properly address its context? What is the primary subject matter of theology, with the issue of the relationship of faith and culture being a defining element in any methodology for a contextual theology? How does scripture work in relation to human culture? How does the theologian identify a distinctive Australian reality? By 1988, as Australia marked two hundred years of European settlement, the first editorial of the newly founded theological journal *Pacifica* could still note that 'the quest for an Australian theology had barely begun' (Honner 1988: iii; see [section 3.2](#) below).

By the 1990s, this quest for an Australian theology focused and gave rise to significant debate about methodology and the significance of the cultural context for any theological work. This debate foregrounded distinct 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' approaches (the terms used by the protagonists) to doing theology. At play was a desire for academic rigour amongst Protestant theologians and the imperative of contextuality amongst their Catholic counterparts. The issues were crystallized in a 'conversation' between Geoffrey Lilburne (Uniting Church pastor, doctorate supervised by Anthony Kelly), Anthony Kelly (Redemptorist priest, PhD Alphonsonianum, Rome; Lonergan Studies, Boston College), and

Frank Rees (Baptist pastor, PhD Manchester), expressed in a series of articles spanning 1993–2002 (1993, 1995, 2002), and anchored by an earlier book by Anthony Kelly, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (1990), which in turn was grounded in a theological methodology he articulated a decade earlier (1979). Lilburne opts for Kelly as his exemplar, though he could have chosen from a number of Catholic theologians who were attempting to contextualize theological reflection in the Australian scene, among them Veronica Brady, Denis Edwards, Peter Malone, Frank Fletcher, Eugene Stockton, Michael Mason, Bruce Duncan, Gerald O'Collins, and John Honor.

Lilburne, who perceives postmodernism as promoting ecumenical dialogue by creating an openness to many viewpoints, set the debate in motion by asking why '[b]y and large, Catholics have taken the running in the area of contextualizing theology in the Australian setting' while Protestants 'have been somewhat reluctant [...] perhaps out of a fear of appearing faddish and a desire to preserve academic rigour and respectability' (Lilburne 1996: 19). In his analysis, the explanation is deeply rooted in the approach taken by the respective traditions to the nature of revelation and human nature. Catholic theology has always been more conducive to contextuality through its 'emphasis on the continuity of divine grace and human nature'; Protestant theology has instead focused 'on the interruption of the Transcendent' (Lilburne 1997: 351). In terms of methodology, Kelly's rigorous use of Karl Rahner's transcendental phenomenology and Bernard Lonergan's understanding of theology mediating between religion and culture thus allowing 'genuine otherness' gave Kelly footholds for identifying 'limit situations' (cf. Rahner) derived from the Australian experience. These limit situations 'lead to a deepening of human subjectivity, which in turn leads to a fresh envisioning of God' (Lilburne 1996: 22). Such limit situations Kelly found expressed in Australian literature and included geographical isolation, the Aboriginal presence, the 'commonwealth', migrants, leisure, sexuality, the land, and issues provoked by the Bicentenary of Australia's foundation.

Lilburne's critique focuses on how Kelly uses scripture, which he regards as anecdotal (Lilburne 1996: 24): for Catholics 'the biblical text illustrates themes arising from elsewhere', while for Protestants 'the work of contextualizing theology arises directly out of biblical study' (Lilburne 1997: 355). Making the human person the starting point for theological inquiry risks reducing God 'to the horizon within which authentic human personhood is achieved' (Lilburne 1997: 353). Lilburne, instead, in proposing a 'Protestant approach', follows Hans Urs von Balthasar's reading of the later Barth that the context of human culture is a methodological presupposition, but it is one that should be governed by the priority of the scriptural word. In his detailed, positive response to Lilburne's criticism, Kelly (1999) is welcoming of an ongoing creative, ecumenical theological conversation on what it means to be Christian and Australian.

Frank Rees, adjudicating an apparent stalemate in the debate, finds ‘the categorization of approaches as “Catholic” or “Protestant” too sweeping and not always helpful’, pointing to differences in methodological approaches in the former, diversity for the latter (‘not monolithic’), along with the conversations and approaches that cross denominational and intellectual traditions (Rees 2002: 276). Though appreciative, he is critical of Kelly’s method which he sees as seeking similarities in the content of ideas. In Lilburne’s method, Rees identifies as inconsistent the insistence that ‘the Word is independent of cultural forms’ (2002: 280). He himself proposes Tillich’s method of correlation and contention but developed more as a ‘conversation’ between the questions arising from an analysis of the human situation and the Christian message, allowing the articulation of ‘the inter-relationship of elements which appear to be separate but which are ontologically united’ (2002: 283). Though Rees plays down the Catholic–Protestant distinction, such a differentiation nonetheless provides a helpful framework for delineating the contours of Australian Theology as it developed during these decades. For today’s theological currents (see sections [4](#) and [5](#) below), it is possible to collapse the broad denominational distinctions due to further progress in ecumenism, theological objectivity, and a broader global audience engaging in theological conversations.

3.2 Roman Catholic Australian theology: 1967–2010

Roman Catholic theology in Australia up until the late 1960s was very much a neo-scholastic manual theology in the ‘Roman mould’ (cf. Molony 1969). Bishops sent the brightest seminarians to Rome. As ‘colonial’ bishops in an Australia which until 1976 was officially classified as a ‘mission country’, they were allocated a certain number of places per year at Rome’s missionary college *Propaganda Fide* (in 1962 incorporated into the Pontifical Urban University) and dispatched the most promising students to Rome after only a few years of training in provincial seminaries. This was to ensure that those likely to become bishops would be Roman in their orientation. In the 1950s, several clergy returned to or remained in Rome for doctoral studies, including Thomas Francis Little (1950–1953) and Francis Carroll (1961–1964), both of whose theses would impact significantly on their leadership of the archdiocese of which they became archbishops – the former in the area of ecumenism and the latter on the devolution of ecclesial authority and the possibility of the integration of local faith and culture (Howard 2008: 14.3–14.4).

The decisive shift occurred with the Australasian cohort of 1967–1971, at the moment when theological thinking about a church with a new understanding of itself and its role in the world was beginning to permeate. *Ressourcement*, *aggiornamento* and the implementation of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, including those on ‘divine revelation’, ‘the church in the modern world’, and ‘priestly formation’, along with the methods in theology underpinning them, were starting to have traction (Rush 2019: 17–21). While Bernard Lonergan had been teaching in Rome since 1953 and developing an

approach that integrated theology with the results of historical research and hermeneutics, publishing his *Method in Theology* immediately after the close of the Council, it was Carlo Molari who impressed the young seminarians (and later his Australian doctoral students such as Francis O'Loughlin) with his pedagogical approach. This aimed at consensus among his international cohort of students as to what was important and worth studying by soliciting answers from the lecture hall: 'What are the novelists in your countries writing about? What are your films about? How are your traditional and tribal practices changing? What do people in your society want from life? What do you want from life? What do you want to avoid in life? What do you fear? What do you want to run away from? What do you want to be saved from?'. This questing stance for *pierres d'attente* (cf. Marie-Dominique Chenu O.P.) – the 'jutting stones' or 'toeholds' to scrutinize contemporary social and cultural movements for signs of aspirations for the spiritual to address the church's message about Christ – is an approach which historicizes and enculturates theology and emphasizes historical consciousness (Howard 2008: 14.4–14.9).

The diocesan priest-theologians who returned to Australia to teach in seminaries across the country, in addition to taking on parish responsibilities, generally did not pursue theological publishing apart from their doctoral theses. Some did take on other responsibilities. Peter Cross, for example, published on aspects of interfaith dialogue related to his role in ecumenism. Terence Curtin became head of the School of Religion and Philosophy at the newly formed Australian Catholic University (1987–2003), later taking on the role of Master of Catholic Theological College (2003–2010) during the process leading to the MCD's transition into the University of Divinity. Though not publishing broadly, diocesan priest-theologians did collaborate with their colleagues in religious orders and helped create the ethos which led to a receptive audience for Australian theological writing and the advances which were occurring internationally.

In its early years, the Australian Catholic University developed a research reputation in Biblical and Early Christian studies, Catholic thought and practice, philosophy, and religion and culture. A generation of senior scholars contributed significantly to ACU's research profile and international reputation: Neil Ormerod (Trinity, anthropology, ecclesiology, Christology); David Sim, Geoffrey Dunn, Wendy Mayer, and Pauline Allen (biblical and early Christian studies); Terry Veling (practical theology); Gerard Hall (practical theology, interfaith dialogue); John Dupuche (interfaith dialogue); Paul McQuillan (empirical theology); Anthony Kelly (systematic theology); Anne Hunt (systematic theology; became the foundation Dean of Theology and Philosophy, 2009); John Thornhill (theology of culture, ecclesiology, ecumenism); Charles Hill (early Christianity, fundamental theology); Ormond Rush (ecclesiology); John D'Arcy May (ecumenism); and Michael Putney (ecumenism).

Catholic scriptural scholarship throughout this period was making its mark on theological thought in Australia. John Scullion (1925–1990) inculcated the best of European exegetical standards in Australian biblical research. In addition to lecturing, his major publications included *The Theology of Inspiration* (1970), *Isaiah 40–66* (1982), major articles in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), a translation of Westermann’s three-volume commentary on the book of Genesis (1984–1986), and his own commentary on Genesis which appeared posthumously in 1992 (Campbell 2012). William Dalton, Antony Campbell, Brendan Byrne, and Francis J. Moloney, like Scullion, have each published internationally acclaimed monographs, contributed articles to leading international journals (as well as some local to Australia), and contributed to the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990). The direction of biblical studies amongst these and other Australian biblical scholars has stressed contemporary relevance without sacrificing scholarly rigour. Mark Coleridge, for example, has explored the role of imagination in both the production and interpretation of the biblical texts and argued that a failure to actualize Scripture in the life of the Church is a failure primarily of imagination (Coleridge 1988: 171–188). Moloney has argued that Christ stands as a challenge to the absolutization of any particular culture, religion, or history (Moloney 1988: 15–43), while Byrne employed emerging approaches to biblical texts to propose a contemporary reading of the parables in Luke 16 whereby ‘the Rogue Steward who takes “violent” action against his own inclination is ultimately the faithful steward in an unequal world’ (Byrne 1988: 1; see further 1988: 1–14).

The Second Vatican Council’s decree on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) inflected moral theology in Australia with a renewed approach and method to develop genuinely comprehensive responses to the challenges to humanity and moral dilemmas prompted by economic and social developments, including globalization, cultural diversity, and social justice issues, while remaining mindful of the Church’s social teaching. In Melbourne, Eric D’Arcy, a priest and philosopher at the University of Melbourne and teaching in theological institutes, was influential. His notable publications were *Conscience and its Right to Freedom* (1961) and *Human Acts: An Essay in their Moral Evaluation* (1963). In Sydney, James Madden, teaching at St Patrick’s Manly, and later Gerald Gleeson, at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, made significant contributions to issues such as gambling and biological ethics respectively. In Melbourne, Salesian priest Norman Ford gained international recognition for his scholarship in the field of bioethics; among his numerous publications, his books on natural law and early human life have become standard works in the field – *When Did I Begin?* (1988) and *The Prenatal Person: Ethics from Conception to Birth* (2002). Also in Melbourne, Jesuit moral theologian William Daniels wrote essays on in-vitro fertilization (IVF), abortion, AIDS, marriage and divorce, priorities in health care, trade unions, just war, and the Roman Catholic Church’s position on biomedical issues. He discussed Aboriginal land rights and Catholic social teaching in *Finding Common Ground* (1985) and contributed an essay on Aboriginal

self-determination in *Reconciling Our Differences: A Christian Approach to Recognising Aboriginal Land Rights* (1992).

Journals, in particular *Compass Review of Topical Theology* and *Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies*, provided a compass for the directions of an Australian theology emerging in Catholic writings in the wake of new currents in theology and church life. The former was founded in 1967 with the aim to circulate informed commentary on the Second Vatican Council from those reflecting seriously on its implications. *Compass'* first editorial addressed 'the theologian's task', reflecting the importance of historical consciousness and context: 'A living theology must develop. It does this by trying to understand Christianity in the context of the world of its time, by facing new situations, by answering new questions' (Edwards 2004: 1). The journal garnered contributions from both clergy and laity across the theological spectrum in Australia, reflecting an appetite for ecumenical perspectives and further reflection on what Australian theology might look like. *Compass* pursued a theology that was 'properly seen as a process, discussion, argument, formulation, failure, which belonged to the whole church and could only advance as more people were involved in it' (Osborn 1979: 7). While informed by sound scholarship, the journal aspired to be accessible to a broad readership, corresponding to the increasing transition from clerical to lay theologians in higher education and an increasingly biblically and theologically literate and degreed laity. A survey of the journal's themes reveals its attunedness to issues that amounted to a maturing of Australian theology amidst ferment, from the period of experimentation, uncertainty, change, and questioning of tradition to reflections on developments in *Theology in the Australian Context*. From contributions alive to Aboriginal pre-history and Australia's location in Oceania to theological consideration of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, biblical issues, feminist theology, evolution, ecology, psychology, the arts, and science, along with issues of ethics, morals, and justice. Even when tackling 'traditional topics' such as 'original sin', 'grace', and 'justification' with a Lutheran response, authors brought a fresh sense of direction and new breadth to theology's most traditional topics (Murphy 1967a: 5–9, 15–21; Waters 1967: 10–14; Schild 1967: 85).

The other journal generated by a new awareness and maturity in Australian Catholicism, *Pacifica*, aimed from the outset to be a 'scholarly journal covering all aspects of theology', a forum for established and emerging theologians to bring to current theological debates the unique contributions of Australasia and the Western Pacific. Choosing to publish the first edition in 1988 to coincide with the bicentenary of European settlement, *Pacifica* 'offered an opportunity to reflect on the place of the gospel in an always secular Australian society' (Honner 2012: 302), while recalling the ancient history of the land (Honner 1988: iii). Though Catholic in its origins and inspiration, the journal very soon developed to become solidly ecumenical and the journal of record for the MCD/University of

Divinity, reflecting the diversity and solidarity of the Christian churches in both theory and practice.

Authorial interest was notable in fields such as theological methodology, moral theology, philosophy and theology, contextual theology, and ideas of dialogue and analogy. There was a noticeable engagement with postmodernism: Terry Veling on Marginal Writing; John Martis on Jean-Luc Marion; Gregory Dawes on Jacques Derrida; and Clive Madder on Maurice Blanchot. Articles and special issues of the journal addressed pressing concerns for the churches and theology. For example, there was a special issue in 1997: 'Feminist Theology: The Next Stage', edited by Dorothy Lee and Muriel Porter. An issue (2006) on 'Land, Culture, and Faith' included articles by noted Indigenous leader and advocate Patrick Dodson and Lee Miena Skye (with a noteworthy article entitled 'Australian Aboriginal Catholic Women Seek Wholeness: Hearts Are Still Burning') as well as Graham Paulson's 'Towards an Aboriginal Theology', in which he asks 'what kind of theology can hold together, with integrity, both Indigenous and Christian identity?' In terms of approach, *Pacifica* consistently maintained 'the centrality of serious and responsible biblical study to the theological enterprise'; it showed 'that theological texts and traditions live and breathe only to the extent that they engage with the intellectual and social milieux of the day'; it allowed a plurality of the ecclesial voices to be heard and honoured (Linehan 2017: 200).

3.3 Australian theology – Anglican and Reformed: 1950s/1960s–2010

The 1950s and 1960s marked a gradual development in Anglican and Reformed theology in Australia. Theological colleges began to appoint scholars who introduced newer theological scholarship. Such advances paved the way for a broadening and deepening of approaches to the theological endeavour and promoted an ecclesiology of 'the whole people of God' that fostered the development of ecumenical ecclesial relationships in the 1960s. As in the past, there were discernibly different cultural and religious outlooks between the capital cities which, taken with the size of the continent and the multiplicity of overseas influences, help explain how general tendencies of theology in Australia are inflected with diversity (cf. Osborn 1979: 13).

In Melbourne, the young Irish scholar Davis McCaughey, destined to be pivotal in the ecumenical movement, came to Australia to be Professor of New Testament Studies (1953). He later became Master at Ormond College and achieved success to a degree that roused fears that 'McCaugheyism' would become a cult (Breward 1993: 147). Colin Williams (see below) and Eric Osborne (arguably 'the most formidable authority on early Christian thought that Australia has ever produced', Runia 2007: 61) opened up new vistas at Queen's College. Leon Morris (1914–2006) at Ridley College, a conservative

in the evangelical tradition and a careful scholar owing much to scholarship of different persuasions, was perhaps Australia's most prolific biblical and theological author, with more than fifty books selling more than two million copies worldwide in several languages (cf. Osborn 1986: 60).

In Sydney, the writings and teachings of Broughton Knox and Donald Robinson at Moore College had a decisive influence on the evangelical ethos of the Anglican diocese for more than three decades through their revival of the classical Reform heritage in light of new approaches to New Testament studies, theology, and church history (Beward 1993: 147). In many parts of New South Wales and Queensland, the broader theological commitments of Ernest Burgmann, through his work at St John's College, Morpeth, as well as the library he founded in Canberra, his publications, and his episcopal ministry had a significant influence on ecclesiology and social justice issues (see [section 1.4](#) above). During his Australian years, the distinguished Presbyterian, Scottish theologian John McIntyre (1916–2005) was an influential voice on the relationship between theology and history. As Professor of Theology at St Andrew's College, Sydney (1946–1956), he was noted for a series of high-profile public debates in which he explored questions of religious belief with the eminent atheist philosopher John Anderson, another Scot settled in Australia. In Adelaide, Lutheran pastor Hermann Sasse (1895–1976), who had been a student of von Harnack, migrated to South Australia where he was appointed to Immanuel Theological Seminary (Adelaide) and became 'a significant theological influence upon conservative theological thought around the world' (Banks 1976b: 40–41). His work on formulating an agreed doctrinal base led to the union of the divided Lutheran synods in Australia (1966, see below). His 479 publications include *Here We Stand* (Minneapolis, 1946), and *This is My Body* (Minneapolis, 1959; Schild 2005).

For Protestant churches in Australia, however, there was no decisive 'event' to provide a deliberative forum which focused worldwide thinking about theology, church structures, and practice in the light of 'the signs of the times' as the Second Vatican Council had done for Catholics (Beward 1993: 168; Rush 2019: 3–11). Australian Synods, Conferences, and Assemblies during the 1960s pursued continuity rather than change or a systematic impetus to enculturate theology and practice. Rather, theological energies were devoted to exploring reunion between Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. There was a significant international dimension, not just through the WCC but the specific influence of the Church of South India and its bishop Lesslie Newbigin who provided a model for the first version of the Act of Union. In 1956, the Joint Commission on Church Union was formed and produced *The Faith of the Church* (1958), a fresh examination of biblical and historical foundations. The second report, *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, together with the *Proposed Basis of Union* followed in 1963, predicated to an understanding of the church as 'the fellowship of all believers, the successors of the ancient people of God, now transformed by the word of Jesus Christ and the gift of the

Holy Spirit, to become the true Israel and the very body of Christ' (Joint Commission on Church Union (Australia) & Uniting Church in Australia 1963: 12). The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) was established in mid-1977 when most congregations of the Methodist Church of Australasia, about two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, and almost all the churches of the Congregational Union of Australia united under the Basis of Union (Schild 2005).

The issue of the absence of 'event' and 'forum' and the imperative for renewal in the Anglican Church is reflected in the *Journal of Anglican Studies* founded in 2003 by Bruce Kaye. In the first editorial, he notes that despite Anglicanism's global reach 'on the back of a colonizing power in the form of the established church of that power [...] the global Anglican community lacks any sense of a long-standing universal structure or high-level coherence as to its global identity' and so 'stands in some contrast to the universal jurisdictional iconography of Roman Catholicism' (Kaye 2003: 7–9). The dispersed and multilateral authority enshrined by the 1948 Lambeth conference had, by the end of the twentieth century, proved 'centrifugal rather than cohering' and created difficulties for identifying shared convictions across the globe, leading too easily to 'a public rhetoric peppered with the language of "orthodox", "revisionist", "fundamentalist", "liberal", and so not helpful for achieving 'a greater sense of commonality in the global communion' Kaye 2003: 8. The purpose in founding the journal was therefore to have theologians across the globe 'engage in serious and committed conversation about the distinctives of the Anglican tradition and its experience of such plurality in a shared faith tradition' (2003: 8). For the Australian context, the journey from being the single 'established' church to being one 'among a plurality of other faiths' raises questions of whether there is 'one truth or many', of 'how unity relates to plurality' – questions intensified by 'the plurality within Anglicanism itself' and the tension between being genuinely 'catholic' or genuinely 'evangelical' over matters like biblical interpretation, ecclesiology, lay presidency, liturgy, and sexual morality (Rayner 2003: 46–47, 54, 58). Is the unity prompted by the broader ecumenical movement to be inclusive or exclusive?

Other religious traditions were similarly facing the challenges of interconfessional ecumenism and reunion. For the several Lutheran synods which were convened after splits in the South Australian Lutheran community in 1846, doctrinal issues and theological arguments were to the fore, including millenarianism, baptismal practices, and a dispute as to whether the confessions of the Lutheran Church were accepted 'in as far as' they were in agreement with the word of God, or 'because' they were in agreement with the word of God. The history of divisions amongst Lutherans points to the important place of theological argument in the Lutheran tradition (Osborn 1979: 4). In 1966, the various synods came together as the Lutheran Church of Australia, the theological basis of which is expressed in the manifesto of the journal that resulted, the manifesto of which stated:

It is only natural that a church which came into being as a result of doctrinal discussions extending over a quarter of a century, in which discussions of Scripture and Confession were always the authority to which appeal was made, should expect that its theological publication should be bound by the same unconditional pledge to the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions' (*Lutheran Theological Journal* 1967: 1; Osborn 1979: 4).

The momentum for ecumenism increased during the 1970s, including dialogue between the Anglican, main Reformed churches, and the Roman Catholic Church, a conversation made possible by the Second Vatican Council's 'Decree on Ecumenism'. The fundamental focus of Protestant theology in Australia during this period was inevitably on ecclesiology to which ecumenism was predicated. Cooperation among the churches was stimulated by, and in turn stimulated, historical research to discover and underpin common understandings among the different traditions.

Contemporaneously there was, however, in the Protestant churches a sense of waning influence in civic life and dissatisfaction with how they were failing to influence Australian culture and society. This need was reflected, for example, in the writings and unpublished lectures of Australian-born Colin Williams (1921–2000), for a time Professor of Theology at Queen's College, Melbourne (1959–1962). In his monograph *John Wesley's Theology Today* (1961) and booklets *What in the World* (1963) and *Where in the World* (1963), Williams asks what there was in the founder of Methodism's beliefs to address new challenges of the times, namely authority and the competing claims of revelation, reason (and science), and eschatological understandings of history. He scrutinizes John Wesley's main beliefs in comparison with beliefs of other reformers such as Calvin and Luther and, in many instances, with the Roman Catholic view in search of insights which Methodism should share on issues which divided them (Williams 1961). His *The Church* (1969), though published after he had left Melbourne to assume the Deanship of Yale Divinity School, advances themes of his Queen's College lectures (1959–1962) to develop an approach to theology that was flexible and responsive in the face of the immense complexity and change in a pluralistic society if it was to fulfil a genuine servant role, especially with regards to the secular institutions where key decisions are made. Such a shift would be an 'ever new event', demanding not just a reformation of old traditions, but renewal (Williams 1969: 146). The way forward was signalled by the ecumenical movement, not seeking uniformity of organization, practice, or even interpretation, but an approach concerned with mutuality and the fulfilment of the church's task.

Williams highlights the importance of conceiving theology broadly to include the history of theology in general, and patristics and Reformation studies in particular. This theology, however, was still very much one of 'theology in Australia' rather than 'Australian theology', focused on fresh examinations of biblical and historical foundations. At stake was how Protestant scholars approached the theological task characteristic of the various

confessions. A genuinely Protestant contribution among Anglican and Reformed churches to Australian theology, however, was developing by the 1990s with a contextual theology grounded in narrative readings of biblical material as in, for example, the writings of Don Carrington (Uniting Church), Djiniyini Gondarra (Uniting Church), and especially Norman Habel (Lutheran). Djiniyini Gondarra (a prominent Aboriginal Elder and church leader emerging from the ecumenical endeavour at Nungalinga College) developed an influential theology that authorized an intersection of biblical narrative with Aboriginal experience, so avoiding the intellectualist preoccupations of Western theology and instead committed to addressing the 'whole person' in the roundedness of their social context (Lilburne 1996: 25; Carrington 1985). The emerging Protestant contribution to developing Australian theology stresses the creative and pluralistic possibilities emerging from contemporary methods of biblical studies, including a readiness to juxtapose biblical narratives with those drawn from other traditions, especially those of Indigenous Australians. These studies emphasize the exploration of points of connection and correlation between the contemporary context and diverse situations, with particular emphasis on symbols, ideologies, and foundation narratives. At the same time, there is a reluctance to work with concepts such as 'spirituality' and 'sacramentality' characteristic of Catholic approaches as found in Anthony Kelly's work (see [section 3.1](#)). In the Protestant approach, elements of the Australian context are presumed rather than explicitly described and analysed, and, without strong methodological tools, the result is generally a less sustained contribution to contextualized theology (see Lilburne 1996: 29–30).

A particular aspect of theology that engages all major Protestant theological traditions, and embeds them in Australian public life, is Christian social thinking, especially in terms of ethics and social justice. For some churches, this amounts to an articulated theology and a broad social programme. For others, due to their ecclesiology and approach to authority, social ethics derive from individual personal experience, making it hard to sustain coherent programmes. The Uniting Church, in particular, has been to the fore in theological and practical terms, with social concern central to its constitution (1977). The eagerness to uphold basic Christian principles and values has found expression in commitments to racial, economic, and social equality for all in Australia and beyond, with successive Uniting Church Assemblies passing resolutions on issues ranging from justice for Indigenous Australians to global disarmament, from the treatment of asylum seekers to climate change. The approach taken to translating commitments to practice is through the principle of 'subsidiarity', i.e. all that can be done 'lower down' in the structure of a social organization should be done at that lowest possible level (Zirnsak 2014: 113–114, 116, 118, 129). Other churches find such a coherent approach to social concerns and policy a challenge due to their adherence to a congregationalist structure rather than the more centralized structure, which means that any social ethic that emerges is orientated to the

personal experience of the individual rather than the implementation of a broader social programme (May 2014).

An indication of the currents of thought emerging in Anglican and Reformed writings as theology developed through this period can be traced through the pages of the *St Mark's Review*, the Anglican-focused journal published by St. Mark's Library (Canberra, 1957–), and (from 1997) the St Mark's National Theological Centre (see [section 1.4](#) above). From the outset, each issue of the journal has been organized around specific themes, with articles expressly commissioned to range beyond regional demands in order to engage with the wider Christian conversation around the world and to relate this wider discussion to the Australian local scene (Garrett 2011b: 73).

The themes addressed include ethical issues that arise from contemporary science, [technology](#), and ecology; the serious challenges of Australia's history with the Indigenous people of this land; ecumenical and interreligious engagement and dialogue; religious violence and the problem of peacemaking in the world; justice for women in the church and in society; biblical and theological interpretation and their contemporary challenges and imaginations; the church's relation to society and politics; and theology in conversation with the arts: [music](#), poetry, and storytelling (see Garrett 2011b: 74). Along with Australian theologians, important international scholars have been included: Y. E. Raguin, SJ on the importance of interreligious conversation; Edward Schweizer, the famous New Testament scholar from Germany, on the nature of worship in New Testament church communities; Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest from USA, on the challenge that the ecological crisis presents to the world's religions in general and Christianity in particular; Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican Archbishop from South Africa, on the issue of racism in the world today; and Richard Hays, a contemporary Methodist New Testament theologian from Duke University, on how the New and Old Testaments mutually guide the interpretation of scripture. The journal's authors reflect the ecumenical and contemporary objective of the journal and of currents of theological thought in Australia more generally.

General trends amongst Protestant theologians can also be garnered from *Colloquium*, the journal initiated by ANZATS in 1967, and the College of St John the Evangelist in Auckland. Like the *St Mark's Review*, it is ecumenical by intent, although the majority of authors have tended to be Protestant rather than Catholic. The areas most frequently discussed include theological education, contextual theology, theological methodology, the history of doctrines, theological anthropology, and practical theology. Articles that reflect the commitment of theology in Australia to addressing pressing questions can be illustrated by, for example, Stephen Garner's 'Hacking the Divine: A Possible Metaphor for Theology-Technology Engagement' (2005) and an article by Uncle Graham Paulson and Mark Brett, 'Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through Aboriginal Eyes' (2013). One

looks to theology in the technological age, while the other continues the quest to engage the sources of the Christian tradition with Indigenous spiritual experience.

4 Australian theology: contemporary currents (2010–)

4.1 Australian theologians and international esteem

Australian theologians who emerged during the 1960s and 1970s and who have achieved international esteem were, and in many cases still are, producing some of their most mature work well into the twenty-first century. These senior scholars cross the divide between different institutional settings. As can be gleaned from the previous sections of this article, they pioneered new methods in theology, led theological institutions, nurtured research candidates, advocated with government and public universities, and put theology in Australia on the international map, with many of them holding senior positions at major overseas institutions for periods of their careers. These significant theological thinkers include the following: Robert Banks, Roland Boer, Mark Brett, Brendan Byrne, David Coffey, Mary Coloe, Austin Cooper (d. 2023), Denis Edwards (d. 2019), Norman Ford (d. 1922), Robert Gascoigne, Robert Gribben (d. 2012), Kevin Hart, Peter Jensen, Bruce Kaye, Anthony Kelly (d. 2023), William Loader, Dorothy Lee, Daniel Madigan, Francis Moloney, Ben Myers, David Neville, Gerald O'Collins (d. 2024), Neil Ormerod, Stephen Pickard, John Painter, David Runia, Charles Sherlock, David Sim (d. 2023), Elaine Wainwright, and Norman Young (d. 2024). Former Anglican Primate of Australia Peter Carnley has published two companion volumes on resurrection belief (2019), pursuing arguments proposed in his earlier controversial book (1993), and more recently on Arianism in Australia (2023). Meanwhile, Ormond Rush has emerged as one of the most important English language interpreters of Second Vatican Council in the last 20 years, privileging *Dei Verbum* as the lens for interpreting the Vatican II and the ecclesiology of synodality. Charles Birch (d. 1990), Challis Professor of Biology at the University of Sydney, came to prominence for his writings on and advocacy of 'science and God', ecotheology, and theological work emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life, for which he was awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize (1990).

4.2 The style of Australian theology

The style evident in all these theologians now characterizes much of what is current in theology in Australia. The approach is critical, constructive, and contextual rather than dogmatic, didactic, and apologetic. The gap that often exists between biblical scholarship and theology has always presented a challenge. The importance of scripture in Australian theology can hardly be underrated. Differences over the status and authority of scripture were fundamental to sectarian division. While some see the Bible as *sola scriptura* (scripture alone as the source of authority for Christian belief and practice),

others are prepared to see scripture as primary but also acknowledge the roles of reason and tradition, and, increasingly, the weight of experience as a source for theology. Such differences are particularly apparent in Anglican theological traditions where evangelicals are more focused on *sola scriptura* and catholic Anglicans recognize scripture as primary but also acknowledge reason and tradition as sources of revelation. Roman Catholic theologians emphasize the classic sources of Christian revelation interplaying with empirical experience in what could be called, in Anthony Kelly's apt phrase, 'a framework of collaborative creativity' (Kelly 1979): scripture, reason, tradition (history and magisterium), and 'the documents of life' (human experience). In general terms, in the scholarship of recent decades, there has been a trend to integrate biblical research into the theological endeavour due to the advent of a focus on a narrative critical approach to sources and the world in front of the text, and not simply on historical, critical concerns, though these remain foundational. The role allowed to scripture has been a major influence on moral and environmental debates. As elsewhere, the Bible's cultural authority continues to be a significant factor in the contemporary Australian setting (Lake 2018; Watkin 2022), with the development of biblical hermeneutics bringing 'exegetical rigour into a necessary conversation with systematic theology and ethics' (Brett 2010: 156).

For an increasing number of theologians, the category of spirituality has proved to be more malleable than that of theology, able to embrace subjective and objective dimensions as well as the symbolic (as for example, in the writings of Dorothy Lee and Anthony Kelly). A developed theology of sacrament is proving to be conceptually capacious and has assisted not just in contextualizing Australian theology but also in advancing ecotheology, as seen, for instance, in the writings of the Australian-born Orthodox theologian John Chryssavgis (Honorary Professor of Theology in the Sydney College of Divinity).

Ecclesiology and the meaning of the church in the world remain the ongoing challenge in the development of new directions in theology. For Catholics, the sources of theology (*ressourcement*) that were excavated to propel ecclesiology through the largest ecumenical council in the church's history (Second Vatican Council) are now quarried to develop ecclesial theology to keep apace with Pope Francis' imagining of an inclusive church. It is also increasingly apparent that the encyclicals of Pope Francis have affected the style and direction of Catholic thought in Australia (and elsewhere), especially *Laudato si'* on the environmental crisis and its connection with social issues, and *Fratelli tutti* with its invitation to enter into the gospel parable of the Good Samaritan rather than moralizing in the abstract or presenting a traditional papal social message.

Ecumenical relationships between the particular forms of the Christian denominations in Australia have also entailed rethinking of doctrine and the role of theology, with stress and division surfacing over the content of theology as different denominationally oriented

institutions enter into or break away from institutional partnerships. Geoffrey Thompson, in recent publications, has highlighted this issue in his reflections on the absence of a rationale for theology in the Uniting Church in Australia, an increasingly urgent question as the UCA approaches the fiftieth anniversary of union (e.g. Thompson 2018).

The Australian religious context itself is continually evolving and so shaping the future of theology in Australia. The composition and feel of Australia's religious and spiritual life has radically changed in recent decades due mainly to migration and the impact of the changing demographic in terms of the Christian population in Australia (see Bouma 2006: 52–60). This has led to a less Eurocentric orientation in theology, further encouraged by the churches needing to address their history of interaction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a strong consciousness of Australia's location in the Asia-Pacific region.

The up-and-coming new generation of theologians is attuned to the Australian context. Not only is it more generally lay, but it has also been educated to doctoral level in Australia itself more than overseas. That there are now Indigenous theologians such as Denise Champion, Anne Pattel-Gray, and Garry Deverell is a significant advance, especially in view of their work theologizing the experience of Indigenous peoples both within and outside the churches and Eurocentric theology.

While the interest in what constitutes a genuinely Australian theology remains (as, for example, in the intervention by Ben Myers; see Myers 2021), the matrix of theological thought continues to be indebted to northern hemisphere thinkers, in either analytic or continental mode, among them Rudol Bultmann, Karl Barth, René Girard, Jürgen Habermas, Ernst Käsemann, Emmanuel Levinas, Bernard Lonergan, Jean-Luc Marion, John Milbank, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, and Paul Tillich.

4.3 Contemporary orientations of Australian theology

In terms of subject matter and orientation, there is continuing commitment to developing classical themes in the areas of fundamental theology (e.g. Isabell Naumann), Trinity (e.g. Anne Hunt), Christology (e.g. Peter Carnley, Philip McCosker, and Peter John McGregor), and patristics (e.g. Kevin Wagner), as well as issues generated by the early church's canons, texts, and credal formulations. These subjects are the 'bread and butter' of theologates across Australia and the talented theologians teaching in them. These areas, however, along with the shape of theology overall, are increasingly driven by a sense of communal and civic interest and public of responsibility. Foremost among these is engagement with Indigenous Australian spirituality and issues pertaining to the environment, gender, sexuality, ecclesial governance (including women and laity), human life, race, and social justice. These are reflected very strongly in the monographs that are receiving critical attention.

Such critical attention, and the current themes and orientations in Australian theological research and writing can be traced, for example, through the authors and titles awarded an *Australasian Theological Forum Theological Book Prize*. The persistent and often elusive theme of Australia's religious identity is the focus of Gary Bouma's 2006 book, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the 21st Century* (awarded in 2008). Several books that have received the prize centre on gender and sexuality: Dorothy Lee's *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (awarded in 2005); and Alan Cadwallader's *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophenician Women* (awarded in 2009). Pressing contemporary concerns are addressed by the late Denis Edwards in *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (awarded in 2006), who, through the 'great episodes' of creation, grace, the Christ-event, and the church, perceives the Spirit's activity in movements that promote the justice and welfare of the poor, of women, and the good of the Earth (this last issue presaging his later work on ecotheology). A renewed awareness of the importance of apophatic theology and the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius undergirds David Newheiser's book on political theology (*Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology and the Future of Faith*, awarded in 2021). Christopher Holmes' theological analysis and interpretation of the biblical witness grounds ethics in Christology (*Ethics in the Presence of Christ*, awarded in 2015), while Anne Hunt's volume is more classically and doctrinally framed (*Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith*, awarded in 2007). Ormond Rush received awards twice, highlighting the ongoing importance of unpacking systematically the implications of the Second Vatican Council (*The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*, awarded in 2009; *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles*, awarded in 2021).

In addition to the themes illustrated by the *ATF Book Award*, publications that also could be grouped under contextual theology (see [Christian Theology, section 5.3](#)) in the last decade show theologies shaped by a range of issues. These include:

- Indigenous theology/postcolonial and Indigenous critiques of Eurocentric theology (e.g. Mark Brett, Anne Pattel-Grey, Garry Deverell, Norman Habel, Jione Havea, Duncan Reed);
- spirituality as a way of thinking theologically, emphasizing emplacement and landscape (e.g. Vicky Balabanski, Sarah Bachelard, Alda Balthrop-Lewis, Rachel Davies);
- theologies of human flourishing (e.g. Stephen Carlson, Michael Champion, Kylie Crabbe, Matthew Crawford, Ben Edsall, Sarah Gador White, Michael Hanaghan, Dawn LaValle Norman, Jonathan Zecher);
- ecotheology, environmental theology, and ecological hermeneutics (e.g. Anne Elvey, Norman Habel, Christopher Watkin);
- apophatic theology (e.g. Peter Kline, David Newheiser);

- *ressourcement*, catholicity, and theology (e.g. Benjamin De Spain, Philip McCosker, Tracey Rowland);
- Second Vatican Council and Catholic ecclesiology (e.g. Emmanuel Nathan, Isabell Naumann, Antonia Pizzey, Tracey Rowland, Ormond Rush);
- theologies of ministry, priesthood, and ecclesial governance (e.g. Jamie Calder, Maeve Louise Heaney);
- Protestant/Pentecostal ecclesiology and experience (e.g. Shane Clifton, David Perry)
- theology and contemporary social and cultural crises (e.g. Bruce Duncan, John McDowell, Scott Kirkland, Christopher Watkin);
- theology and gender/feminism (e.g. Anne Elvey, Jacqui Gray);
- theology's complicity in the sexual abuse crisis faced by almost all ecclesial denominations (e.g. Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer);
- theological reflection on 'violence in the name of God' (e.g. Joel Hodge, Matthew Ogilvie);
- theological responses to contemporary views of science and religion, humankind, and the cosmos (e.g. Doru Costache, Peter Harrison);
- the interrelation between music and theology (e.g. Maeve Louise Heaney); links between theology and the arts, including poetry, dance, and the visual arts (e.g. Lexi Eikelboom);
- theological aesthetics (e.g. Lexi Eikelboom, Scott Kirkland);
- belief and phenomenologies of revelation for a modern secular ethos (e.g. Kevin Hart, Robyn Horner, Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, James McEvoy, Shane Mackinlay, Glenn Morrison, Neil Ormerod);
- comparative theology, world religions and theology for the Asia-Pacific Region (e.g. Edmund Chia, Gemma Cruz, Jione Havea, John Dupuche, Daniel Madigan, Emmanuel Nathan);
- theology and the Global South, global evangelicalism, and 'evangelical disruption' (e.g. Shane Clifton, Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga, Mark Hutchison, Geoffrey Treloar);
- hermeneutics and reception (e.g. Mark Lindsay, Darren Sarisky, Kevin Wagner);
- theological ethical reasoning, moral theology, and social justice (e.g. Peter Comensoli, Anthony Fisher, Cameron Forbes, Robert Gascoigne);
- ethics and theology of migration in relation to social justice (e.g. Gemma Cruz, Peter Jensen);
- theological anthropology/theology of the body (e.g. David Kirchhoffer, Isabell Naumann, Kevin Wagner).

The boundaries between topic areas such as those listed above are becoming more porous and hybridized with, for example, publications on science and theology, and reframings of feminist theologies through an ecological lens (as is found in the recent

work of Anne Elvey). Peter Harrison's writings, in particular, aim at fostering a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between theology and science, so generating new directions that recognize the mutual influence and interdependence of the disciplines to address pressing questions at the intersection of faith and knowledge (e.g. Harrison 2015).

Treatment of all topics is increasingly transnational. A telling example is the work of Anne Pattel-Grey which has turned to Black Womanist theology from the USA to better situate and sharpen the discussion about the experience of Australian Indigenous women. In terms of comparative contexts, as well as method, conversation with thinkers past and present reflects a globally engaged approach to current theology in Australia. Now, less and less is the nature of 'Australian' theology to be characterized as a search for identity, as it was at the end of the twentieth century. As with most areas of research today across the disciplines, theology in Australia engages self-consciously with a 'global' context, as is indicated by most of the themes listed above, but theologians are aware of the nation's positioning in the world and the role of, and critique of, distinctively Australian attitudes, values, and culture.

4.4 Collaborative research in theology

A significant advancement in the Australian theological setting has been the development of research clusters to foster collaborative research. Such research clusters are serving to shift the approach to research away from the propensity to individualism that has tended, until recently, to characterize theological research in Australia.

Charles Sturt University, with St Mark's College, has its well-established Centre for Religion, Ethics and Society in Canberra. Set up initially (1988) in the interests of ecumenism and to loosen denominational oversight, it now actively seeks to foster an ethos for high-quality publications in theology and religious studies by its researchers.

The University of Divinity currently hosts four active research networks: Australian Collaborators in Feminist Theologies, Confluence (around meditation in different spiritual traditions), Religion and Social Policy, and Syriac Language Research. In 2021, it launched a School for Indigenous Studies to decolonize the Eurocentric versions of Christianity that remain dominant in the country. This school closed in July 2024. The University of Western Sydney currently has a Religion and Society (Research) Cluster.

Australian Catholic University, through its Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry (along with the School of Theology), has been pursuing projects that have assembled leading scholars and research partnerships to spearhead innovative projects with significant, high-quality publication and other research outputs. A Research Centre for the Study of

the Second Vatican Council recognizes a further focus of ACU research and involves partnerships with several European and UK universities.

5 Future prospects of theology in Australia: higher degree research

Theology in Australia has developed in an increasingly identifiable way. There is a strong, diverse, critical culture of theological scholarship which is local yet globally engaged. The COVID-19 pandemic, while limiting travel, served to generate strategies to ensure that Australian theologians were not separated from their counterparts in other countries. Very quickly, Australian theological institutions positioned themselves at the centre of global, online seminars. The audiences generally numbered in the several hundreds. Established scholars, early career researchers, and those between joined on the same platforms to debate current and emerging questions. The digital age proffers new opportunities for theological conversations across institutional, geographical, and ecclesial boundaries. No longer is there a need to lament that the streams of theological thought in Australia still run only one way. These global scholarly networks have continued into the post-pandemic period. Australian Catholic University, for example, joined with the University of St Andrews to host the 2023 meeting of the European Academy of Religion. Also signalling the changed position of Australia in the discipline's landscape are the major conferences in theology and biblical studies which now include Australia as a venue for international meetings, for instance the meeting of the prestigious *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* at ACU in 2024.

The self-confidence that has developed from such recognition has had an impact on the higher degree research being pursued in the discipline. There are now sufficient significant scholars with the capacity both to mentor early career researchers and to train a new generation of scholars. This development has been encouraged further by access to government funding for graduate research (though there remain some inequities in distribution which are still to be addressed; see Oslington 2014; 2020).

At present, there is no comprehensive, systematic, consistent data available on the overall history and status of graduate theological research in Australia. A preliminary research project to address this lacuna has been commissioned by the Council of Deans of Theology (Cox 2017, with the project still to be finalized). Independently of the Council of Deans' project, an analysis (undertaken for this SAET article by Dr Cameron Doody) of the titles of more than 700 doctoral theses completed in eleven institutions/consortia yields a snapshot of institutional strengths and current interests. There is richness and variety in the theological research being undertaken by the emerging generation of Australian theologians, offering new insights and voices as well as a deeper understanding of the global and Australian context and how these might be fruitfully engaged. The most

productive institutions are Flinders University, the University of Divinity, and Australian Catholic University, while the new university colleges are making a noteworthy contribution by such means as the Sydney College of Divinity's Theology Research Network and the Australian College of Theology's monograph series. In terms of topic interest, practical theology (religious education, interfaith dialogue, ecumenism, missiology, and social teaching) has produced the most theses, followed closely by New Testament Studies, contextual theology (including liberation theology), and then interdisciplinary theology (including intersections with gender, LGBTQ+, race, postcolonialism, and postmodernity). Practical theology is a strength of the University of Divinity, Charles Sturt University, as well as at ACU. Interdisciplinary theology is strong at Flinders University and ACU. New Testament Studies are strong at the University of Divinity, Flinders University, Charles Sturt University, ACU, and the university colleges (ACT, Moore College, and SCD). In theological pedagogy, SCD currently leads the way with its biennial Learning and Teaching Theology Conference and resultant publications. A key challenge for all theological institutions is to shape their research strategies so that emerging younger scholars will maintain and extend the discipline in creative ways, dealing with issues that are at once pressing and perennial.

6 Conclusion

In sum, theology in Australia is vibrant and multifaceted: there are diverse institutions and individuals who are contributing to its continuing development; opportunities for research collaboration are growing; and approaches to theological inquiry are increasingly interdisciplinary. The contribution of Australian theological scholarship locally and internationally has become increasingly significant. While secular tendencies in Australia's culture and institutions provide challenges, in the hands of an emerging generation of scholars and research leaders, the current prospects for the future of theology in Australia are encouraging. It is more and more recognized that the secularism that has shaped the context for the development of theology to the present day has not been necessarily anti-religious. Rather, as noted in the first part of this article, there was a concerted endeavour to be free of many of the chronic rivalries and impasses of the 'Old World' by ensuring the secularity of the public institutions established in the nineteenth century (cf. Fleming, Lovat and Douglas 2015: 30). Debating and questioning the legitimacy of theology as public knowledge in the context of secularity is a continuous thread in the development of religion and, therefore, theology in Australia. The ongoing challenge has been, and remains, to develop an Australian theology that is both *emplaced* and *for*, not simply *of* or *in*, a secular age (cf. Davison 2019; Cooper 2018: 336) since belief manifestly remains an enduring variable in the Australian experience (cf. Bouma 2006).

Attributions

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