

The Sydney intellectual/ religious scene, 1916–2016

James Franklin

Strictly speaking, there is no intellectual/religious “scene” in Sydney, in the sense that there is, say, a folk music scene. A “scene” has groups which know one another and an audience that cycles through them. But with religion it is much more a matter of individual denominational silos with little interaction in the sphere of ideas and debate. There is no regular gathering in theology or religion that fulfils the role in the philosophy world of the annual Australasian Philosophy Conference.

The century-old, interdenominational Heretics Club at Sydney University,¹ which this journal issue celebrates, is a rare exception. But a dozen people meeting almost under cover of darkness do not constitute a “scene”.

Nor has Sydney had any high-profile religious figure in its public life comparable to Archbishop Mannix in Melbourne. Hilary Carey wrote in the *Dictionary of Sydney*, “Religion has not been a notably creative force in Sydney’s cultural life and the city is conspicuously lacking in prophets or founders of new religions.”² That has contributed to a poor penetration of local intellectual life by religious views.

Furthermore, Sydney, unlike Melbourne, has a reputation of being anti-intellectual in religion, with Catholic life being shaped by the long reigns of the unintellectual Archbishops Kelly and Gilroy,³ Sydney evangelicals suspecting the fallenness of human reason, and Presbyterians hunting heretics. Archbishop Kelly was more concerned with the evils of mixed bathing, his Anglican counterpart Archbishop Wright with the opening of the Royal Easter Show on Good Friday. Building in stone and mortar has occupied much more energy than constructions in ideas. General histories

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of the Australian churches find little to remark on in intellectual life, and especially so in Sydney.⁴

But is a dereliction of duty for religion to neglect its intellectual side. Especially in a diverse climate of opinion such as obtains in Australia, it is always necessary to explain reasons why one's position should be taken seriously. One needs to explain it to oneself, to begin with, and Christianity is an essentially missionary religion, so communicating it to others with reasons cannot be ignored. With the decline of religious belief since the 1960s, the need for work on ideas and arguments has become all the more acute.

Institutions

The official custodians of intellectual life, the universities, were officially indifferent to religion. Sydney University (the only university until the late 1940s) was founded as a strictly secular institution (in contrast to the Oxbridge tradition)⁵ and did not allow degrees in theology. Its religious university colleges made little effort either (except St Andrew's). In 1916, the University of Sydney Senate approved a change to its act to allow degrees in Divinity, but Archbishop Kelly put a stop to that with the thought "they must not Protestantize the University like they have tried to do with the public schools."⁶ Sydney University did grant Bachelor of Divinity degrees from 1937 to 1993, but few of them and in an under-the-table fashion.

It is true that Sydney University had in 1916 a pro-religious professor of philosophy, Francis (later Sir Francis) Anderson, a former minister in the Australian Church.⁷ That was not to last. In addition to its secular tradition, Sydney University arts faculty came to be dominated, especially in public perception, by its militantly atheist professor of philosophy, John Anderson. As Challis Professor of Philosophy from 1927 to 1958, he influenced several generations of students, many of whom were later prominent in public life. His statements of 1943 that religion had no place in education were condemned by the State Parliament as "calculated to undermine the principles which constitute a Christian state."⁸ His student and successor as Challis Professor, John Mackie, became internationally well-known for his anti-religious book, *The Miracle of Theism*, and for his theory that the whole idea of moral obligation is a mistake.⁹ Their influences were all the stronger for lacking any counterweight in the form of a prominent Christian voice in the university.

The inhospitability to religion of the university environment created a fragmentation of theological education and encouraged a conception of it as training for clergy rather than research.¹⁰ Hence “the calm of the Australian religious world, unfortunately, is rarely disturbed by the strong breezes of creative theological thought.”¹¹

Individual theological colleges of the different denominations found themselves forced to cooperate in a Sydney College of Divinity in order to acquire government-recognised degrees. After a very tortuous process, approval was given and the College existed in virtual form from the mid-1980s, but not before the evangelical Anglican Moore College quit on the grounds that collaboration might involve “activities which were inimical to the gospel”. The Baptists also quit as it might have implied recognising Catholic seminarians as men “in training for the Christian ministry”.¹² The College’s later life has involved more genuine dialogue and has contributed to ecumenical understanding.

The institutional scene has become more diverse in recent decades, with Notre Dame University, Australian Catholic University, Campion College, the Catholic Institute of Sydney, Morling College, Alphacrucis College, and some centres at Macquarie University all offering tertiary courses and conducting some research on religious topics. But Sydney remains without an institution like Melbourne’s University of Divinity, which builds on Melbourne’s tradition of cooperation in religious thought.

Despite those challenges, many individual Sydney thinkers have made contributions that involve a religious point of view.

While it would be possible to organise the material under denominational headings, it is more informative to proceed by themes:

- Philosophy (including ethics)
- Theology (including scriptural studies, missiology, and ecclesiology)
- Polemic, apologetics, heresies, and ecumenism
- Religious perspectives on the human person (psychology, psychiatry, literature)
- Societal comment (economics, politics, law, the environment)
- History of religious ideas and communities
- The esoteric and pantheism

That does neglect one important production into which a good deal of religious thought has been put, sermons. Few texts have survived.

Philosophy

Protestant theology in Sydney has been of a generally evangelical flavour, taking to heart St Paul's warning against the dangers of "vain and deceitful philosophy" (Colossians 2:8). Protestant thinking has thus generally avoided philosophy strictly so called.

The Catholic tradition has taken the opposite view. Vatican directives of the late nineteenth century required that training in all Catholic seminaries include extensive compulsory courses in philosophy. Thus all Catholic seminaries maintained staff trained in philosophy, teaching (up to the 1960s) a generally strict form of Thomism. That applied not only to diocesan seminaries such as St Patrick's, Manly, but to all the seminaries of individual orders of priests, such as the Jesuits,¹³ Franciscans, Dominicans, Marists, and Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The more senior of the staff in these institutions were trained in the philosophy faculties of European Catholic universities such as the Angelicum in Rome and the University of Louvain.¹⁴ Seminary instruction did not always adapt to the realities of a conscripted audience more interested in preparation for parish work than in philosophical subtleties. For example, lectures were often in Latin, as preserved in the extensive volumes of lecture notes of Thomas Muldoon, later auxiliary bishop of Sydney.¹⁵

Significant figures in classical Sydney Thomism were Dr P. J. ("Paddy") Ryan, philosophy lecturer for the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at Kensington and leader of the anti-Communist "Movement" in Sydney,¹⁶ and Dr Austin Woodbury, founder of the Aquinas Academy, a philosophy school for the laity in Sydney which he ran with large enrolments from 1945 to 1975.¹⁷

In the years after the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, seminary philosophy became less significant because of a precipitous decline in seminary enrolments, but also because Thomism was identified with the "old order" of pre-Conciliar "triumphalism".¹⁸ Nevertheless a commitment to teaching philosophy, especially ethics of a loosely natural law orientation, remained important in seminary curricula.¹⁹ Catholic strands in philosophy, both more and less conservative, have been strongly represented at the University of Notre Dame (under the leadership of Hayden Ramsay) and the Australian Catholic University²⁰ (where the distinguished ethicist Raimund Gaita held a part-time position). At the Catholic Institute of Sydney Gerald

Gleeson, Andrew Murray, and John Lamont have published on a range of philosophical topics related to religion.²¹

A peculiarly Catholic intellectual practice was an offshoot of moral philosophy called casuistry, the application of moral principles to detailed cases of conscience. One could write in to the *Australasian Catholic Record* with difficult cases and the professors at Manly would answer. Is it permitted to deliberately confess to a deaf priest? (Of course not, since that defeats the essential purpose of confession.)²² Is an excommunicate obliged to attend Mass? (A more realistic case than it looks, as there were many who considered themselves Catholics but who had incurred automatic excommunication by marrying in another Church: Ben Chifley, for example. The answer is tricky.)²³

One subtle casuistical question of considerable practical import in the fifties was, May one vote at meetings of organisations of which one is not a member? B. A. Santamaria assured James McAuley that stacking of union meetings never happened, or if it had happened once or twice in Sydney, it had been put a stop to. On the other hand, Dr Ryan was reported as having consulted the top moral theologians in Rome and being advised that Catholics were morally justified in doing anything the Communists did.²⁴

Casuistry died in the mid-sixties after the Second Vatican Council. Around 1980 the space it formerly occupied was filled by the “theology of the body”²⁵ and in the wider community by applied ethics (and with much better funding). Some subspecialties of applied ethics, such as business ethics, have had no special connection with religion.²⁶ Bioethics, however, is different. Catholics and to some extent evangelicals have maintained a much more conservative position than the general society on abortion, euthanasia, gay rights, gay marriage, contraception, and IVF. They have written, taught and argued in public extensively on these questions and have maintained centres such as ACU’s Plunkett Centre for Ethics.²⁷ One leading writer on a range of these topics, Anthony Fisher,²⁸ was appointed Catholic Archbishop of Sydney in 2014. These efforts have achieved some degree of political success, leading to secular commentators such as David Marr and Andrew Denton railing against the evils of theocracy.²⁹ As of 2016, these issues are probably the highest-profile intellectual/religious questions in the public mind, and they look like staying that way.

Philosophy of religion strictly speaking has not been strong in Sydney, unlike Melbourne,³⁰ with the exception of some recent philosophy of religion from a continental perspective.³¹

One classic philosophical problem that transcends religious boundaries, and that all religious people need to consider, is the problem of evil. A major treatment is by Eliezer Berkovits, rabbi at the Great Synagogue in Sydney in the late 1940s between living on other continents. His *Faith After the Holocaust* adopts a view that the “hiding of the divine face” is necessary to permit human autonomy and freedom.³² On the other side of the fence, John Anderson’s successor John Mackie maintained that the problem of evil showed a strict logical contradiction in theism and hence a knock-down argument against it.³³

Theology

During the twentieth century, Sydney Anglicanism moved in a strongly evangelical direction, making it stand out from other Australian (and English and American) dioceses. That trajectory was directed by a series of strong principals of Moore College, T. C. Hammond (1936–53), Marcus Loane (1954–58), Broughton Knox (1959–85), and Peter Jensen (1985–2001). The second and last of these became archbishops of Sydney, but Broughton Knox was the most influential in setting the direction of ideas.³⁴ His article “Propositional revelation—the only revelation,”³⁵ indicates his insistence on a literal faith in scripture, free of what he took to be human accretions of tradition and metaphor. His “propositional” view was accused of being Andersonian, possibly in jest, but there was some real resemblance between the Protestant and the atheist. How propositional to be about revelation is certainly a basic question of theology, and the Nicene Creed and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are quite propositional;³⁶ nor is it totally clear what the alternative is (or alternatives are). Michael Jensen says in his analysis of Sydney Anglicanism that Knox’s aggressive title overstates what he actually said, which was to deny then-current views that revelation was just an “event” without content; Jensen says it should not mean, for example, preferring St Paul’s statements over Jesus’s parables on the grounds that parables are stories and not propositions.³⁷ Knox was supremely confident that it was clear what the propositions in the Bible were, “All we need is

simple common sense rules [so that] the Christian reader is able to come to a clear understanding of what God is teaching him" in Scripture.³⁸

In biblical studies, Sydney University came grudgingly to allow studies in Semitic languages, provided they kept clear of truly religious questions.³⁹ Sydney made one of the most colourful contributions to the field in Barbara Thiering's esoteric interpretation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴⁰ Expert reaction to it was unanimous: "Professor Barbara Thiering's reinterpretation of the New Testament, in which the married, divorced, and remarried Jesus, father of four, becomes the "Wicked Priest" of the Dead Sea Scrolls, has made no impact on learned opinion." (Géza Vermes); "It is safe to say that no serious scholar has given this elaborate and fantastic theory any credence whatsoever." (N.T. Wright)⁴¹ The public loved it and book sales were high. The Sydney tradition of seeing how far you can go has been followed in recent times by Raphael Lataster's book arguing that Jesus did not exist.⁴²

At the opposite extreme, undoubtedly the highest-impact work from Sydney on any religious topic was the directly literal presentation of the Passion story in Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*.⁴³ Locally prominent expressions of Christian faith such as Arthur Stace's half million chalked "Eternity"s and the Hillsong Church have also been associated with the more literal end of interpretation.

In theology strictly speaking, that is, theorising about the nature of God, a significant development has been David Coffey's work on the Trinity. Coffey emphasises the New Testament language of the gift of the Holy Spirit as in the baptism of Jesus, in preference to the language of incarnation of later Councils.⁴⁴ Some doubted its orthodoxy, as we will see later in discussions of heresy.

For Catholics, the Church itself and its tradition have a theological importance which they do not have for Protestants. Neil Ormerod argues that questions about how the Church ought to be, such as whether women can be ordained, whether the Church has too much dogma, or whether the Constantinian connection of church and state was a wrong turn, can only be solved by a systematic ecclesiology. It must be informed by a critical church history and the social sciences.⁴⁵

As time went on, angst developed about whether theology was sufficiently Australian or "inculturated". The unanswerability of the question has prompted unending debate.⁴⁶

Sydney was the organising centre for the missions of some Catholic orders, especially the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Marist Fathers.⁴⁷ The issue that needed thought was how missionaries should respond to native cultures. Should the missions attack idolatry and introduce Western ways of doing things in general, or spend more time listening to the wisdom of native cultures? What about gross violations of human rights in those cultures? Francis Xavier Gsell, the missionary in the Northern Territory who retired to Sydney and wrote his memoirs, *The Bishop with 150 Wives*, said of those who criticise in principle the missionaries' attempts to change culture:

these fine talkers, few of whom have given the subject any deep thought, themselves enjoy the benefits of Christian civilization: and they enjoy this security because, in day[s] of old, missionaries brought these benefits to their forebears. The heathens are men as we are men and, as such, they have the same right that we have to the benefits of Christianity.⁴⁸

For many Christian denominations, notably the Catholics and the Salvation Army, a massive charity effort was central to their mission. The charitable works of Christianity are no doubt more responsible for what favourable perception the churches enjoy in secular society than any intellectual activities. The charity effort did not produce much theory. Perhaps the Sydney figure who most prominently represented the charity aspect of Christianity was the Rev. Alan Walker of the Central Methodist Mission, conservative in theology but somewhat left-wing in politics, pacifist and opponent of Australian involvement in the Vietnam war, TV and newspaper performer, and founder of Lifeline.⁴⁹ For many years he was the man behind a Sydney tradition that on Easter Sunday the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial believes in Christianity.

Polemics, heresy, and ecumenism

Some look askance at polemical religious argument, fearing it lacks both charity and rigour. That is often true. Still, it forces both sides to say clearly and concisely what they mean in a way that outsiders can understand, a discipline which the academic world could well benefit from. Sydney, more direct and fractious but less venomous than Melbourne, was a natural place for it.

A proselytising religion cannot do without apologetics. It needs to present basic arguments for outsiders on why one should believe it. One of the classic works was written by Michael Sheehan, consecrated in 1922 as Coadjutor Catholic Archbishop of Sydney (with right of succession, the story of why that right was not exercised being a murky one).⁵⁰ His widely-used *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine*⁵¹ is mentioned respectfully in the autobiographies of B. A. Santamaria and Tom Keneally. One of his concerns in Sydney was the Catholic Evidence Guild, which in the style of the times took controversy out to the Domain on soapboxes.⁵² Frank Sheed, a founder of the Guild, moved to London to become a noted publisher and lay theologian.⁵³

In recent times a book that presents well the basic case for belief in Christianity is *God, Actually* by Sydney lawyer Roy Williams.⁵⁴ Cardinal Pell has also turned his hand briefly to the same task.⁵⁵ Both authors, like Sheehan, take a strictly intellectualist approach, arguing that like a legal case the reasons for Christian belief must be objectively strong on the evidence.

Until recent decades religious polemics were rife, and pursued at a high level of emotional and intellectual intensity: Catholics versus Protestants, evangelicals versus liberals, Christians versus atheists, Catholics versus Communists, Mannix followers versus Gilroy followers . . . In the first half of the century from 1916, the main topic of religious debate was Protestant versus Catholic.

Sectarian tension in Sydney reached a height in 1922 with the *Ne Temere* debate, which was resolved, in a sense, intellectually. The papal decree *Ne Temere* had declared invalid marriages of Catholics performed by non-Catholic ministers, apparently threatening a large number of New South Wales children with bastardy. After a campaign by the Protestant Federation, a bill to criminalise the propagation of the papal decree was passed in the Legislative Assembly and came within one vote of passing the Legislative Council. A compromise formula was agreed that let both sides off the hook, while its exact propositional meaning was hard to interpret.⁵⁶

While sectarian tension was never as high again in Sydney, it eased only gradually, especially in areas such as employment discrimination. Between the wars some of Sydney's radio stations were set up by religious entities, in part to pursue polemics: 2SM by the Catholics ("Saint Mary's"), 2CH by the Council of Churches, 2GB by the Theosophists (after Giordano Bruno). On Sunday nights the spokesmen could be heard going at it hammer

and tongs: on 2CH, Archdeacon Hammond, Principal of Moore College and Grand Master of the Loyal Orange Lodge; on 2SM Dr Leslie Rumble, Catholic convert from Anglicanism.⁵⁷ Rumble's books of Radio Replies were hugely successful in America and said to have sold seven million copies. "Using plain language and short sentences, and avoiding rhetoric, he spoke ninety words to the minute in a voice like worn sandpaper, giving an effect of common sense and rationality."⁵⁸ Polemic for a popular audience it may have been, but the standard of argument was high. Higher, certainly, than in contemporary left-right debates.

Dr P. J. ("Paddy") Ryan, philosophy lecturer at the Sacred Heart Monastery in Kensington, Sydney, was the founder of the anti-Communist "Movement" in Sydney and spoke prominently on Communism in the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁹ His finest hour came on 23 September 1948, when, despite rain, 30,000 people turned up at the Stadium, Rushcutters Bay, to hear him debate communist Edgar Ross, on the topic "That Communism is in the best interests of the Australian people". Ross spoke first, in defence of the Soviet Union. "The audience broke out into coughing as Dr Ryan went measuredly into the influence of the philosopher Hegel on the thought of Karl Marx", but perked up when he waved the Communist Manifesto and discussed the possibility of getting a divorce in Russia simply by sending a card through the post." Ryan, in a quiet, unimpassioned voice, claimed that communism was based on a degraded philosophy of life, that its programme necessarily involved ruthless and unlimited dictatorship, and that the Communist Party of Australia had no loyalty to God or country, but only to Moscow. "In saying that the Catholic Church supported Fascism, Mr Ross was [again the quiet, unimpassioned voice] a liar." (Wild applause.)

Another very popular anti-Communist speaker was the Sydney doctor Fred Schwarz, founder of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade and a great success in California in 1961.⁶⁰

Enemies are internal as well as external. Each sect has an inevitable conservative-versus-liberal conflict, often pursued by intellectual means as well as the usual political and demographic ones. It is strictly a matter of logic whether a minister's theological position is compatible with the creed he is paid to expound, so in the first instance an intellectual matter. Much intellectual energy gets expended on it (as well as political energy). Intellectuals as a class are often on the liberal side of the debate as they are a self-confident and ill-disciplined lot, but not always.

The Presbyterians produced the two highest-profile heresy cases, including an actual conviction. Samuel Angus of St Andrew's College, a liberal scholar of more or less neo-Platonist views, had a running war with the Presbyterian authorities in the thirties and early forties; both sides eventually backed off.⁶¹ Peter Cameron, Principal of St Andrew's College in the 1990s, faced a Presbyterian Church made more conservative by its liberal wing having joined the Uniting Church. He was convicted of heresy in 1993 for views including that St Paul had got it wrong over the ordination of women, and wrote colourful books on the "smug arrogance" and "obtrusive piety" of fundamentalism before returning to Scotland.⁶²

Catholics had their version of a heresy hunt in investigations of David Coffey of Manly Seminary for his views on Jesus and the resurrection. As Tony Abbott explained in his article on why he left the priesthood, Coffey's teaching, which Abbott took to deny the divinity of Christ, "steadily undermined my less-than-enthusiastic acceptance of poverty, chastity, obedience and the predominantly sacramental character of priestly ministry."⁶³ That set the cat amongst the pigeons.⁶⁴ High-profile critics of the way the power structures of the Catholic Church work, such as the media priest Paul Collins and Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, have faced the usual attacks on their orthodoxy.⁶⁵

A different intellectual aspect of the conservative-vs-liberal fight in Catholic circles was the struggle for control over university chaplaincies and youth activities. The chaplain to the Australian Catholic Students Association was for some time until recently the very old and very conservative—and, as it proved, very popular—Fr Greg Jordan SJ. He had earlier been headmaster of Riverview when Tony Abbott, Anthony Fisher, and Barnaby Joyce were students; Barnaby Joyce said after his death that Fr Jordan had "a very passionate philosophical drive that had brought him into the political realm."⁶⁶ The evangelicals also had success on campus with their most direct and uncomplicated representatives such as Philip Jensen.⁶⁷ Such positions play well with the young.

One area where Sydney has been fortunate is in religious broadcasting, especially on the ABC. While originally conceived of as an extension of Christian evangelising,⁶⁸ in later decades Radio National programs such as Stephen Crittenden's Religion Report and Rachael Kohn's The Spirit of Things⁶⁹ provided regular intelligent and incisive comment on the full range of Australia's religious concerns. TV is not quite so well suited to intellectual

life, but the ABC's long-running Compass programme has filled a gap. Other contributions from the ABC include the Boyer Lectures by such figures as Archbishop Peter Jensen⁷⁰ and Caroline Jones's popular radio program and books on "The Search for Meaning", which elicited the opinions of environmentalists, artists' models, former prime ministers, herbalists, and so on (but not of any philosophers).⁷¹ In 2012 nearly a million viewers watched Cardinal Pell and a jet-lagged Richard Dawkins square off for a pub-stoush-style debate on Q&A.⁷²

Alan Gill, as religious writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* for seventeen years, created high-quality journalism on a great range of religious topics. Similar audiences were reached by the Spirituality in the Pub series of talks from 1995.⁷³ Australia's leading intellectual magazine, *Quadrant*, has been hospitable to discussions of religion (except when it briefly moved to Melbourne under Robert Manne's editorship). Competent journalists and editors have thus to some extent created the religious/intellectual "scene" that religious leaders and intellectuals themselves failed to. At least, they created a scene from the point of view of the audience, who were able to hear a range of voices, but the presenters themselves were not talking to one another.

However, commercial radio and television and most newspapers have come to be nearly religion-free zones.

The opposite of polemic, so to speak, is ecumenism. It has a peculiarly difficult relation to the intellectual aspects of religion. Careful thinking should help sort out the essential unity in different traditions from accidental differences, but in practice there are temptations to paper over the cracks between different thought forms without much regard for contradictions. Although sectarian rudeness is not now much seen, ecumenical thinking has not proved very popular in the wider churches.⁷⁴ Two leading figures in ecumenical dialogue have been from Sydney, Rabbi Apple and Cardinal Cassidy.⁷⁵

The human person

The nature of the human person should have been a big opportunity for religion. In the mid-century very reductive views were issuing from university departments of psychology and psychiatry—Freudian and behaviourist ones especially. (Economics and philosophy departments joined in.) The most

extreme effect was to be seen in Sydney, with the gung-ho brain surgery and deep sleep “therapy” of Dr Harry Bailey that killed a considerable but unknown number of people.⁷⁶ Some objections were made to these anti-human trends,⁷⁷ but by and large an opportunity was missed.

The novel is the ideal vehicle for examining the human person in full roundedness. Australia has nothing like François Mauriac or Evelyn Waugh. It is not only the Great Australian Novel that is still awaited but the Great Australian Catholic Novel and the Great Australian Evangelical Novel. Perhaps the closest contender is Christopher Koch, who lived in Sydney late in life.

We do have two novelists who powerfully portrayed a hyper-Catholic clerical culture: Morris West and Tom Keneally. The best-selling novel in the United States in the year of the Vatican Council, 1963, was Morris West's papal wish-fulfillment fantasy, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. That followed his huge international success in 1959 with *The Devil's Advocate*. Both novels helped create in the English-speaking world the current of ideas soon to be christened “the spirit of Vatican II”. Equally obsessed with the priestly life and its agonies of emotions and beliefs are Keneally's novels based on Manly seminary,⁷⁸ and his recent novel dealing with the abuse crisis.⁷⁹ Highly coloured as these accounts are, non-fictional seminary memoirs such as those of Chris Geraghty⁸⁰ suggest they are little exaggeration of the truth.

In the mid-century, James McAuley was a literary figure who brought together a number of strands of thought and action. Originally an atheist student of John Anderson, his sojourn at a mission in New Guinea resulted in a dramatic conversion to Catholicism in its conservative form.⁸¹ He vigorously attacked secular modernity, established *Quadrant* as a political-intellectual journal to combat communism and other threats to civilisation, and joined in the anti-communist political manoeuvres of B. A. Santamaria's Movement. Initially at least, his understanding of Catholicism was distinctly philosophical in the style of Gilson and Maritain; the Christian tradition, he says, is “confined to a few bare principles of natural law and a meagre deposit of revealed teaching”.⁸² McAuley expressed his own view of the essence of Catholic philosophy in a well-known passage in *The End of Modernity*:

While the Greco-Christian tradition remained intact, it was possible to give an intelligible account of human personality and show in what its eminent dignity and worth consist. To be a person means to be capable of reason and

choice; able therefore to apprehend objective values and become a bearer of those values. What the Renaissance did was to begin to fritter away this conception of man as a rational being oriented to real values, in favour of a cult of individualism and personal idiosyncrasy . . . The notion of the value of personality, whose banishment the totalitarians have gladly accepted from the hands of scientism, survives for the liberals only as an irrational sentiment, and under these circumstances the very meaning of personality is corrupted.⁸³

His ambitious epic poem “Captain Quiros” imagines a Catholic vision for Australian history, but one beset by many enemies. McAuley, like Santamaria, did not find the post-Vatican II church so sympathetic.

Patrick White’s work was not religious, but nor was it free from an obsession with the “numinous”. White was certainly against church religion, but some of his characters have a kind of imprecise revelation of the divine in ordinary life. He wrote,

I believe most people have a religious faith, but are afraid that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals. That is particularly common in Australia where the intellectual is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It is easier for me to make these admissions, because I am not an intellectual, only a doubtful Australian, and in many other ways beyond the pale.⁸⁴

Most poets see their work as somewhat divorced from the strictly intellectual and are inclined to contrast imagination and reason. Thus poets such as Christopher Brennan, Francis Webb, Les Murray, and Noel Rowe for whom religion has been important probably fall outside the scope of the present article.⁸⁵ That was not McAuley’s view, however. He says “deep waters of feeling are stirred, and imagination induced to disclose its hidden treasures, only under the regnant star of intellectual ideas.”⁸⁶

Societal comment

Some religious traditions tend to focus on personal salvation, others see merit also in moral action and the redemption of society. Charitable works

are one outlet; a more intellectual one is theory criticising the arrangements of society. It is an exercise fraught with perils, since society is complex and analysis of it intellectually difficult. Questions of economics, climate change, refugees, or indigenous spirituality are very difficult and do not lend themselves to a casual “application” of moral perspectives imported from elsewhere. It is easy to make a fool of oneself spouting wet-behind-the-ears soft-left theories on economics and politics, and to appear to be enjoying oneself excessively by condemning this and that on the pretext of “speaking truth to power”. The problem is expressed by Tony Abbott with his usual directness:

The priesthood gives someone the power to consecrate bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. It doesn't give someone the power to convert poor logic into good logic. A political argument is not transformed into a moral argument simply because it's delivered with an enormous dollop of sanctimony. That can often be the problem when religious people start dealing in politics.⁸⁷

“Social justice”, he says, is usually “socialism masquerading as justice”.⁸⁸ Characteristically, Broughton Knox thought the same. “The teaching and actions of Jesus”, he says, “nowhere show a concern for ‘social justice’ . . . The reason is that the call for social justice springs from envy rather than from compassion.”⁸⁹ Knox's qualified support for apartheid seemed to some hard to reconcile with Christianity.⁹⁰

That scepticism is very Sydney, so different from the rule of saints favoured in *bien-pensant* Melbourne.⁹¹ Sydney has taken a less intellectual attitude than in the south. Thus there is no parallel in Catholic Sydney of the Melbourne *Rerum novarum*-based agenda of Mannix, Scullin, Calwell, and the *Catholic Worker*. New South Wales was all behind-the-scenes deals with the Labor Right, free of distracting theory. (Although the state did later see a one-off oddity of a premier with a master's degree in feminist theology.⁹²)

Still, societal arrangements are the result of historical forces and are not self-justifying. They do need moral criticism and the religious perspective cannot abandon the field. There really is such a thing as social justice and good reasons why it is connected, logically and historically, to religion.⁹³ The Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, based in Sydney, continues to issue an annual Bishops' Social Justice Statement.⁹⁴ Economics is an

important field needing moral comment, as it deals with human actions but in the mass invites a purely “scientific” approach.⁹⁵ Some Sydney authors have pointed out the lack of ethical commentary on those parts of the economy that most involve direct human choice, entrepreneurship, small business, and professional services.⁹⁶

Catholic philosophy has had a major impact in the law. Catholic natural law philosophy generally declined after 1965, regarded as hopelessly identified with the old order. It reappeared in the High Court of Australia in the 1990s. Catholics tend to hold a very different philosophy of law from the normally dominant Protestant and secular view. The difference concerns the relation of law to ethics. According to secular “black letter” lawyers like Chief Justices Owen Dixon and Harry Gibbs, there is no particular relation. The law builds on its past and its important value is consistency; it would be a grave evil if individual judges were to change the law so as to impose their “private” moral views. Catholics, on the other hand, are inclined to say that the point of the law is to implement justice, which follows an absolute standard external to the law. A rather extreme version of that position was taken by a young Sydney lawyer in the 1950s, William Deane. He said of international law, that “This basis [in natural law] gave international law a rich philosophical foundation which was a source of unlimited development. In it there is a reservoir of rules for all situations and cases. A law based on natural law can never grow out of touch with the current needs of nations.”⁹⁷ By the 1990s, when the *Mabo* case on indigenous land rights had come before the High Court, Deane and his fellow Catholic Gerard Brennan were writing the judgements. The issue was that the precedent of *terra nullius* appeared to be unjust. Would they impose their “private” morality and overturn the existing law? They did. Their explanation was that the doctrine of *terra nullius* conflicted with one of the deeper (moral) principles of the law, the equality of persons.⁹⁸

In recent decades the environment has been a favourite topic for religious comment. It is an uphill job since it has not been a strong theme in most religions’ traditions, so it can easily look like an exercise in me-tooism. Groups like the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change and Catholic Earthcare Australia have been making an effort,⁹⁹ somewhat undercut by Cardinal Pell’s saying the opposite.¹⁰⁰

Feminism, refugee issues, and indigenous affairs require similar difficult negotiations between heart, faith, and mind.

The Sydney doctor Patricia Brennan proved a dynamic leader of the Movement for the Ordination of Women and the Australian Feminist Theology Foundation, which brought together women from different churches.¹⁰¹

Perhaps the most influential Christian figure in indigenous affairs was A. P. Elkin, an Anglican clergyman and Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University from 1933 to 1956. As the dominant figure in anthropology in the mid-century, he persuaded governments of the benefits of a policy of assimilation.¹⁰²

History

For most religions, the tradition of the faith community itself is theologically as well as emotionally significant. So historical research on the tradition is an important intellectual contribution to religious life. Much of Australian work in the area has been done in Sydney.

Just as the Labor Party takes its history more seriously than the Liberals, so the Catholics have written their history more enthusiastically than the opposition. At least until recently, Catholic history was “the most confident and scholarly sub-branch of Australian religious history.”¹⁰³ It may be that a few heroic myths have become mixed in with the facts from time to time. Eris O’Brien,¹⁰⁴ Patrick O’Farrell,¹⁰⁵ Tim Suttor¹⁰⁶ and Edmund Campion¹⁰⁷ are among the historians who have given Australian Catholic history a high profile as well as professional standing. The Australian Catholic Historical Society and its *Journal* have been active in conserving the tradition since 1940, as well as the *Australasian Catholic Record*, mainly aimed at priests’ interests. *Annals Australasia*, believed to be Australia’s oldest magazine, aims at an educated but more popular audience with articles on historical and other topics. The journal *Manna* in the 1960s developed Catholic intellectual life from a somewhat more liberal perspective.¹⁰⁸

The importance of tradition raises the possibility of promoting reform through historical work that undermines simplistic popular conceptions of a church’s origins. It is an opportunity taken by Bruce Kaye, long General Secretary of the Anglican Church of Australia, founding editor of the *Journal of Anglican Studies*, and author of *An Introduction to World Anglicanism*.¹⁰⁹ Kaye argues that the Reformation is one phase that the Church of England went through, like the time of Bede or the era of British colonialism, rather than its unique founding event, as Sydney evangelicals would have it. “The

Reformation monuments are cast in the language and institutional assumptions of Tudor imperialism, and these distort the religious perception.”¹¹⁰ Reinvention is called for, free of those dead weights.

Naturally, the majority of Sydney Anglicans are considerably more positive about the history of the evangelical tradition as it stands.¹¹¹ Stuart Piggin¹¹² and *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review* have dealt with wider evangelical history. The Baptist Historical Society of NSW publishes *The Baptist Recorder*.¹¹³ Methodism and Presbyterianism have also attracted historical attention.¹¹⁴ The liberal Protestant stream was represented by the Pitt Street Congregational Church.¹¹⁵

Suzanne Rutland¹¹⁶ and the *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society* have performed a similar task for Judaism, while the *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* addresses wider Jewish issues, often historical. Rabbi Harry Freedman of the Central Synagogue, Bondi Junction, was a distinguished translator of the Talmud and commentaries.¹¹⁷

Since its establishment in 2013, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has transformed knowledge of the worst aspects of the history of the churches. With its massive resources and ability to compel and cross-examine witnesses, it has revealed very many shameful stories of abuse and of failure of the churches to respond to abuse. Some of those failures proved to be connected to features of religious practice such as clericalism, vindicating the views of earlier critics.¹¹⁸

The history of the relation of religion to Australian culture generally has not been so well addressed. Roy Williams’s books on the big picture of religion in Australian history and on Prime Ministers’ religion show how crucial Christian religious belief has been to the generations who formed Australia, though it was often belief of a relatively non-dogmatic kind.¹¹⁹

Australian culture is of course a transplanted Western European culture, formed by a millennium and a half of Christianity. Australian universities have been generally weak on the history of ideas and the work that has been done on the history of the religious contribution to Western thought has had little impact.¹²⁰ The Centre for the Study of the Western Tradition at Champion College has begun, and the contributions of the well-funded Paul Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation are eagerly awaited.

The academic *Journal of Religious History* has gained a solid reputation for work on many aspects of international and local history of religious topics. Macquarie University, with its Centre for the History of Christian

Thought and Experience and The Society for the Study of Early Christianity, has contributed significantly to early Christian history through the work of Edwin Judge and later scholars.¹²¹ At Sydney University, the Department of Studies in Religion has conducted research on ancient, medieval, oceanic, and Asian religions.¹²²

The Esoteric and Pantheism

There are three essentially different views on the religious nature of the universe: atheism, “personal” theism, and pantheism (all of which need to be understood widely). Atheism is beyond the scope of this paper, but pantheism covers a large spectrum of more or less religious views. They promote a personal attunement to higher but non-personal spiritual realities, free of the bonds of institutional religion and “myths” about gods.

Sydney was a world centre for one of the more elaborate manifestations of this idea, theosophy. The dominating figure of Charles Webster Leadbeater moved to Sydney in 1915 after some years in India. Despite some difficulties before and after that time over boys and the teaching of masturbation, he established a thriving theosophical community. In Sydney he wrote such books as *The Science of the Sacraments: An Occult and Clairvoyant Study of the Christian Eucharist* and *Australia & New Zealand: Home of a new sub-race*. He had himself consecrated a bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church, which attempted to combine the richness of Catholic liturgical forms with the deletion of unpleasant Old Testament views of God’s wrath.¹²³

Annie Besant, the world leader of Theosophy, visited Sydney¹²⁴ in 1922 and in the burst of enthusiasm arising from her visit the movement constructed the Star Amphitheatre at Balmoral Beach. Unsympathetic Sydneysiders alleged it was for the purpose of watching Jesus walk through Sydney Heads at the Second Coming.

Leadbeater left for India in 1929. The theosophical community at The Manor in Mosman included the 2GB transmitter and still survives. The Theosophical Society’s Adyar Bookshop, which existed for ninety years from 1922, provided Sydneysiders with material on a wide range of alternative religious opinion.¹²⁵

Associated with the Sydney Theosophists in the 1920s were Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, newly arrived after working on the design of Canberra. They were not greatly impressed with the details of

Leadbeater's opinions and preferred the somewhat similar anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. They regarded their design of the suburb of Castlecrag as an expression of faith, with its bush settings for houses giving their inhabitants "beauty, that leads the heart from things fashioned of wood and stone to the holy mountain."¹²⁶

Tabloid readers of the 1950s, when bored by repeated stories of Mr Menzies's election victories, could divert themselves with the doings of Rosaleen Norton, the "Witch of Kings Cross". Her views, which put the Pan into pantheism, were communicated largely in images, some of which attracted the attention of the police.¹²⁷ (Norton's fellow racketsy Kings Cross identity, the "Queen of Bohemia" Dulcie Deamer, was the mother of one of the few other Sydney women prominent in intellectual religious life, Rosemary Goldie, a Catholic expert on the lay apostolate who became Under-Secretary of the Pontifical Council of the Laity in 1967 and was later Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Lateran University.¹²⁸)

At the opposite pole of respectability stood Freemasonry. In the 1950s it claimed membership of one Australian man in sixteen, representing an extraordinary penetration of its target audience, middle-class white-collar workers. That included university graduates, as shown by the success of Lodge University of Sydney.¹²⁹ Religious without being a religion, it has one dogma, the existence of God, and its principal aim is to promote the virtue of its members. Being officially "a system of morality veiled in allegory" rather than a propositional theory, its intellectual side has a low profile, but it is not entirely absent. Its symbols such as the square and compass are explained as representing virtues like rectitude while build up personal character in a manner attuned to the Great Architect of the Universe.¹³⁰ Freemasonry's policy of toleration of a diversity of religious stances among its members gave the impression that it believed differences of dogma to be unimportant, leading to long-running conflict with the more dogmatic sects, both Catholic and evangelical.¹³¹

A long tradition in art, literature and film-making has sought to find the "numinous" and "epiphanies" in the Australian landscape, sometimes with reference to Aboriginal spirituality.¹³² While the pantheist tendencies are obvious, the nature of the project is to avoid intellectual engagement. In more recent decades, "deep" ecology has played to a similar market. It has not been as popular in Sydney as in Melbourne or Canberra. Cardinal Pell, a man from the south but with sceptical Sydney attitudes, criticised

radical environmentalism as a pagan substitute for religion, saying “In the past pagans sacrificed animals and even humans in vain attempts to placate capricious and cruel gods. Today they demand a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.”¹³³

One figure who did give more intellectual content to the religious aspects of environmental concerns was Charles Birch, Challis Professor of Biology at Sydney University and co-winner of the 1990 Templeton Prize for religion and science.¹³⁴ Besides his work on ecology and support for Zero Population Growth, he developed, in reaction to a fundamentalist youth, a process view of God and a panexperientialist view of the “material” universe.¹³⁵ The Orthodox tradition also has the capacity to see the created world in sacramental terms, and the connections with environmentalism are drawn out by the Australian Greek Orthodox writer John Chryssavgis and various writers in the journal *Phronema*.¹³⁶

The present

Sydney's increasing multiculturalism has contributed to greater religious diversity, without exactly helping to create a diverse intellectual religious scene. Orthodox, Maronite, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Bahai, and other communities have formed, but the close identification of their religious traditions with ethnic identity has by and large meant that few efforts have been made to communicate religious visions to the wider community. There have been a few successful exceptions. The Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana Institute has sponsored the very popular annual Happiness and Its Causes conferences since 2006; the Dalai Lama has joined scientists, psychologists and others to explore the meaning of happiness and methods to attain it. A group with ideas stemming from Advaita Vedanta and Gurdjieff has taught well-attended courses in a “School of Practical Philosophy” since 1967.

The meaning of Islam remains a pressing issue.¹³⁷ The problems in debating the issue were illustrated in 2014 when the normally tame Festival of Dangerous Ideas invited a speaker from Hizb ut-Tahrir to speak and had to cancel his talk entitled “Honour killings are morally justified.”¹³⁸

A great deal has happened in a hundred years. Some individuals have made interesting and worthwhile contributions. But the overall religious/intellectual “scene” in Sydney has been a dispiriting picture of infighting and

recycling of received ideas within discrete and non-communicating traditions. If the general society is losing interest in religion, no-one can be surprised.

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