

# ST MARK'S REVIEW

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**St Mark's**  
NATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTRE

## Creeds and conflicts Doing theology in Sydney, 1916–2016



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REVIEW

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# Creeds and conflicts

Doing theology in Sydney, 1916–2016



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# St Mark's Review

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# Creeds and conflicts: doing theology in Sydney, 1916–2016

## Introduction

Ian Tregenza

The year 2016 marked the centenary of the Heretics Club, a dining club based at the University of Sydney devoted to theological and religious discussion. The Club was established by a group of clergymen as a private forum—outside official church structures—for a critical but sympathetic engagement with the Christian tradition. The Club has managed to maintain its identity over this time in keeping with its founding principles and purposes, notwithstanding considerable changes to its conventions, mores, and membership, and in the context of vast changes to Sydney’s intellectual and cultural life.

The Heretics considered the centenary to be an occasion worth celebrating and in November 2016 a one-day symposium was held at St Paul’s College at the university. The title chosen was “Creeds and Conflicts: Doing Theology in Sydney, 1916–2016.” Speakers were invited to present papers on theology and religious life in Sydney over the past century and to respond to the suggestion in the title that there is a conflictual aspect to the Sydney scene that has influenced theological development. Indeed, the culture of

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conflict in Sydney, to the extent that it exists, might itself be linked to the nature of the religious and theological life of the city, whether in the form of sectarian division or the kinds of theology that have been prominent.

Apart from the first two papers—a schematic history of the Heretics by Geoff Treloar, and an overview of intellectual and religious life in Sydney by James Franklin—the presentations were organized in terms of denominational categories. It was noted in the final panel discussion that, should there be a future Heretics commemoration, it would likely have a rather different structure given the weakening of denominational identification in the past few decades. (It might also extend beyond the Christian tradition.) But the symposium was organized as a retrospective and for much of the twentieth century denominational allegiances held sway. A denominational structure to the proceedings also had the advantage of providing a focus for some nuanced reflections on the character of Sydney theological activity as mediated through particular Christian traditions and in relationship to a variety of institutional settings.

The first paper in this issue is (appropriately) the after-dinner address given by the current “scribe” of the Heretics, Geoffrey Treloar, on the history of the Club. Treloar builds on the work of an earlier scribe, Ken Cable, who wrote a history of the Club up to 1952, published in the ninetieth-anniversary collection of papers. Treloar notes that the Club was one of a number of such organisations established in and around universities, including in Britain and the United States, in the early decades of the twentieth century. This was the age of theological modernism, which was reflected in the makeup and the discussions of the Club in its early years. As modernism gave way to other theological movements and the membership was increasingly drawn from the broader academic world rather than the strictly clerical, so too did the interests of Heretics move on. Treloar charts some of the changes in the scholarly interests of the members as well as the changes in the practices and the rituals of the Club over several generations. In doing so Treloar brings to the fore the spirit of the Club which has managed to combine scholarship, fellowship, and fun in all its endeavours. Though the Club doesn't have a motto, if it were to adopt one, it would be hard to beat Lucian's formulation, *serio ludere*: to play seriously.

James Franklin was charged with the challenging task of setting the broad Sydney intellectual context for the more focused papers that follow. Franklin is sceptical of the idea that there is anything approaching an intellectual/



religious “scene” in Sydney. Despite some important intellectual figures, Sydney’s diverse and seemingly fragmented cultural life has worked against the establishment of recognisable schools of thought (theological or otherwise) and this tests the cultural historian who is searching for connections or patterns. Nevertheless, in his survey Franklin is able to identify characteristic features of Sydney life that set it apart from elsewhere (especially Melbourne). For instance, Sydney, being “more direct and fractious but less venomous than Melbourne, was a natural place” for religious polemics, and he credits a “Sydney tradition of seeing how far you can go” with giving rise to some dubious biblical scholarship. There is also a scepticism that is “very Sydney” which sets it apart from “the rule of saints favoured in *bien-pensant* Melbourne.” Perhaps it is these qualities that make Sydney a congenial home city for a club such as the Heretics.

The Sydney Anglican theological tradition is the subject of Bruce Kaye’s contribution to the collection, “Anglicans Doing Theology in Sydney 1916–2016.” There is a large and mostly polarised literature on Sydney Anglicanism and Kaye approaches the topic by exploring the close links between the Sydney diocese and Moore College, which has seen the effective monopolisation of a particular form of Reformed theology within the diocese. Though evangelicalism has always been a major presence in Sydney, it was consolidated and taken in a particular direction when Archbishop Mowll appointed the staunch Irish Protestant evangelical T. C. Hammond as Principal of the College in 1935. Hammond’s brand of biblical theology was consolidated by his successor D. B. Knox who (in)famously promoted a propositional conception of biblical revelation. The links between the diocese, the college, and its evangelical teaching continued under Peter Jensen as principal of the college and then as archbishop. Those links continue to the present.

The dynamic between ecclesiastical structures and theology is also the theme of Paul Crittenden’s article, “Subject to Rome: The Story of Two Theologians”. The two theologians chosen are Thomas Hayden, who came to Sydney from Ireland in 1889 to take up an appointment at St Patrick’s in Manly where he taught for 40 years, and David Coffey, a member of the Heretics for many years and one of Australia’s most celebrated theologians. Crittenden uses these figures to explore the relations between Catholic theological work and Church authority in the early and the late twentieth century. Hayden’s retreat from an early engagement with biblical criticism illustrates the hostility to modernism within the Church and the pressure

placed on Catholic theologians throughout the world to affirm official teachings. The bulk of Crittenden's paper is devoted to Coffey's theological contribution, in particular his work on grace in relation to the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. This account involved an "ascending Christology" emphasising the humanity of Jesus and the co-involvement of the three persons of the Trinity rather than the traditional "procession" or top-down model. In true Heretical style, Coffey's work came under scrutiny when a group of conservative Sydney clerics referred him to Rome and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith became involved. Though the inquisition lasted two years nothing came of it. Coffey's work has gone from strength to strength and is the subject of several monographs.

The Presbyterian contribution to Sydney theology is the theme of Mark Hutchinson's paper. Presbyterian heretics have a special place in the history of the Club with two of its members, Samuel Angus in the 1930s and Peter Cameron in the 1990s, the subject of "heresy" trials. However, Hutchinson chooses not to focus on these *causes célèbres* because of concerns that they tend to reinforce an unhelpful liberal/fundamentalist lens that feeds a popular political perception, and they obscure the larger contribution of Presbyterianism to Sydney and Australian public culture. Though Presbyterian theology *per se* has not had a conspicuous presence in Australia, Presbyterians have had a profound influence from the days of John Dunmore Lang. Their principal contribution has been in the establishment of educational institutions, from secondary schooling and technical education to the development of the universities. Underlying these institutions and the many reforms led by Presbyterians has been an ideal, going back at least to Thomas Chalmers, of the importance of the cultivation of citizenship in the creation of a Godly Commonwealth.

The Nonconformist traditions are taken up in Glen O'Brien's article, "Methodist, Congregationalist, and Uniting Church Theologians, 1916–2016," which presents a survey of some of the leading intellectual figures within these denominations. As with the Presbyterians, the theological contribution of these denominations is not obvious, yet they have produced significant scholars in a range of intellectual disciplines as well as important public intellectuals. Methodist luminaries include the evangelical peace activist Alan Walker, the biblical scholar Robert Maddox, and biologist/theologian Charles Birch. The first president of the Heretics Club was the Congregationalist and world-renowned Semitic scholar Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher. Another

Congregationalist, Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, became a Professor of Theology at Manchester University. The short history of the Uniting Church has produced important figures such as the theologians Gordon Dicker and Dorothy McRae-McMahon, and a new generation including Clive Pearson and (a recent Heretic) Benjamin Myers.

The final paper in the collection by Denise Austin is entitled “‘A Contagious Church’: Theological Influences of Pentecostalism in Sydney, 1916–2016”. Now the fastest-growing Christian movement in Australia, it has had a presence here since at least the early twentieth century. It grew out of the holiness movement and the international healing ministries of the period. Sydney was not the launching pad for Australian Pentecostalism and it took some time to develop in the city. However, since the 1970s, through the influence of the “latter rain” movement coming through New Zealand and through a larger global network, Sydney has become a world centre of Pentecostalism. Hillsong is the largest and most famous of these churches, led by Brian Houston and growing out of the Christian Life Centre founded by his father Frank. Pentecostal theology is very much the handmaid of the experience of the spiritual gifts, in particular speaking in tongues or *glossolalia*. But it also has a distinctive ecclesiology centred on the charismatic leader and the autonomy of the local church. Beyond Hillsong and the C<sub>3</sub> churches an important emerging centre of Pentecostal theology in Sydney is Alphacrucis College in Parramatta.

This symposium aimed to illuminate the broader context of theological and religious life in Sydney that has left its mark on the activities and the character of the Heretics Club. In turn, the Club has provided a forum for scholarship on religion that has gone on to have some influence beyond the circle of membership. It is often remarked, including by some of the contributors to this issue, that theology does not have a major presence in Australian intellectual life. However, as Wayne Hudson has recently argued, “Australian religious thought has been more interesting and more significant than many writers have assumed.” It is hoped that this special issue of *St Mark’s Review* provides further confirmation of this claim.