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## Intellectual Authority and Its Changing Infrastructures in Australian and United States Christianity, 1960s–2010s

The seismic events of 2020 — a global pandemic with differing levels of trust in public health authorities, the prominence of conspiracy theories, and fresh attention to the ongoing impact of systemic and individual racism — once more made it clear the significance of the way Christians relate to issues of knowledge, expertise and authority in the public sphere.

Yet the events of 2020 did not come from nowhere. US–Australian evangelical Christian responses to shifting cultural and political landscapes, racial justice, authority of science, and decolonisation have entangled histories.

In July 2021 we hosted a hybrid symposium to explore the longer historical crises that sit behind the present picture. We examined these themes and histories from a variety of disciplines, including history, theology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, and others. The symposium was supported via a generous grant from the Religious History Association, and assistance from the Australian Catholic University (Brisbane) and Deakin University (Geelong). While we intended to meet in-person in Brisbane, yet another wave of COVID-lockdowns across New South Wales and Victoria meant this was not possible.

Coincidentally, initial planning for the symposium marked 25 years since the publication of Mark Noll's landmark *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994) which surveyed the historical roots of what Noll saw as the lamentable state of evangelical engagement and involvement with mainstream knowledge production enterprises in the US. More recently, Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford, 2014) provided a nuanced account of the many ways in which US evangelicals since the 1960s sought to respond to the “crisis” of epistemic authority in the US. She described how many US evangelicals had developed an alternative intellectual infrastructure of their own, generating a distinctly evangelical expert whose authority was recognised and deployed in an evangelical mediascape and educational network.

The symposium did not seek to centre the Noll–Worthen analysis or merely apply it to Australia, but to widen and build on such US-focused work by including the Australian context, encompassing a scope broader than just evangelicalism. In addition to complicating narratives that centre the US religious experience, the symposium sought to examine the hypothesis that the period of the 1970s–1980s served as a specific fulcrum where there was a transition from a diversity in thought on social ethics and party-political allegiances in the 1970s to a closedness and rigidity with Christians enlisted into 1980s culture wars. Yet, the US culture wars diffracted through Australian public life in multiple and unpredictable directions.

By “infrastructures” of intellectual authority, the symposium aimed to put into historical perspective the way Christians in Australia and the US have licensed and credentialed ideas and their purveyors as authoritative or not. This includes churches and their professions of adherence to the authority of scripture and ecclesial authority but goes beyond these dimensions to explore actually practiced historical mediations of intellectual authority over the previous 50 years at the interfaces of universities, Bible colleges, publishing and marketing houses, media ecologies and parachurch ministries and more.

The first keynote of the symposium was delivered by Professor Kristin Kobes du Mez (Calvin University).<sup>1</sup> She delivered a paper — “A Vast Congregation of Consumers: Popular Culture and Cultural Authority in Modern American Evangelicalism” — that explored the theme of infrastructures in the context of debates over definitions of evangelicals and evangelicalism. While these definitional debates have a long history, Du Mez noted contemporary anxieties about the term at the intersection with politics and the election of Donald Trump. Du Mez described evangelicalism as a cultural movement and an identity formed out of a culture of consumption rather than a set of doctrinal beliefs. She examined how evangelicals have produced and consumed a vast array of products — such as Focus on the Family, Veggie Tales, Kurt Cameron films, and music by DC Talk and Amy Grant — so that even if people are unaware of evangelical theology, they have likely been shaped by evangelical consumer culture. Du Mez argued that this should not be dismissed as a kitsch subculture but that these consumer practices and their connection to cultural authorities produces and wields a diffuse socio-political power that is beyond the control of evangelical theologians and church leaders.

Our second keynote explored a further dimension of intellectual infrastructure, namely factors shaping orientations of trust or suspicion toward mainstream expertise and Christian relations with secular disciplinary knowledge.

1. Kristin Kobes Du Mez is Professor of History and Gender Studies at Calvin University. She holds a PhD from the University of Notre Dame and her research focuses on the intersection of gender, religion, and politics. Her most recent book is *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (W.W. Norton & Company 2020).

Associate professor Tom Aechtner (University of Queensland)<sup>2</sup> delivered the paper, “Creationism with an Australian Accent: Politics, Schools, and Global Exportation,” which showed how Australian creationism was not a mere US copy but in recent years Australian creationists had travelled back to missionise US creation scientists. Aechtner showed how Australian creationist, Ken Ham, cofounded *Answers in Genesis International* based in Kentucky and established Australia as a global exporter of young earth creationism. He also showed how creationist ideas had become entangled with science curricula in Australian state and private schools. Aechtner concluded with the provocative claim that in regard to creationism, the US has started to resemble Australia rather than the other way around.

We also asked about the way that such infrastructures of intellectual authority in Christianity have been racialised, taking whiteness, in Willie James Jennings’s terms, to be their “convening power,” and the ways that Indigenous theologians, Black theologians and others have viewed the task of theological formation in recent decades. Professor Willie James Jennings (Yale Divinity School)<sup>3</sup> delivered a keynote entitled: “The Builders Rejected: Reimagining Institutions After Whiteness.” Jennings opened his address in outlining that “we are yet to reckon with colonial desire and the distortive formation at the heart of education and Christian intellectual life.” Jennings showed how the colonial desire that centred whiteness “created our dominant visions of how to form everything — from people to societies — and in so doing gave us diseased ways of building and thinking institutionally.” The challenge for us, according to Jennings, is to consider the “ongoing effects on how we enact authority, both intellectual and otherwise, and we might begin a different reality of building and institutional thinking.”<sup>4</sup>

The workshop concluded in considering these infrastructures in the light of the ongoing imperative to decolonise knowledge production. The final keynote was from Rev Dr Garry Deverell<sup>5</sup> who gave the paper: “Colonising

2. Tom Aechtner is an Associate Professor in Religion and Science at the University of Queensland. His work lies in contemporary science-and-religion discourse, with a focus on religiously-motivated vaccine hesitancies, antievolutionism, scientism, mass persuasion, and public perceptions of science. He also has secondary research interests associated with religion in the African diaspora, Pentecostalism, and Global Christianity. He is the author of *Media and Science-Religion Conflict: Mass Persuasion in the Evolution Wars* (Routledge 2020).

3. Willie James Jennings is Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University. He is the author of multiple books, including *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans 2020) and *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press 2011).

4. Quotes taken verbatim from a recording of Prof Jennings address.

5. Garry Deverell is a trawloolway man from lutrawita/Tasmania and vice-chancellor’s fellow, Indigenous Theologies, at the University of Divinity based in Melbourne. He is the author of *Gondwana Theology: A Trawloolway Man Reflects upon Christian Faith* (Morning Star 2018) and *The Bonds of Freedom: Vows, Sacraments and the Formation of the Christian Self* (Paternoster 2008). Garry is a priest of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne and has worked in parishes, hospitals and academic institutions for 30 years. His academic appointments include a Sanderson Fellowship at Pilgrim Theological College and a Turner Fellowship at Trinity College Theological School, both in Melbourne. He has lectured in liturgical theology, homiletics and systematic theology within several colleges of the University of Divinity and is a long-term member of the Australian Academy of Liturgy. Garry was, for many years, a member of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and is a current member of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council.

Indigenous Religion? A Case Study from the Uniting Church in Australia". Deverell provided a close and critical reading of the preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia that recognises the role of the Church in the process of colonisation and that the "the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people ... and gave them particular insights into God's way."<sup>6</sup> Deverell used the preamble to examine the nature of authority in conversation between Indigenous peoples and settler Christians. He raised questions, such as "On what basis can anyone claim to know that the Triune God of Uniting Church Christians is the same as the creator-ancestors who formed the Australian landscape and speaks through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law, custom and ceremony?" Engaging with these kinds of questions is only just beginning in Australia. Deverell argued that we need to collectively respond to these and other questions to develop a decolonial or "postcolonial" theological discourse.

In addition to the four keynotes, the symposium had ten individual papers from historians, theologians, philosophers, gender and sexuality studies scholars, and scholars of religion organised into four panels: (1) social ethics, gender, and historiography; (2) currents in Australian and Global Protestantism; (3) coloniality, history, and indigenous & settler theologies; and (iv) intellectual authority and Christianity in environmental politics, 1960s–1990s.

The papers presented in these panels, and the ensuing discussion among participants examined the ways Christian churches, groups and individuals in Australia and the US, and Canada changed over time in the way they exercise, licence, distinguish and generate intellectual authority. The discussions also focused on whether there were distinctively US modes of generating intellectual authority, leadership and credibility that have taken root or been adapted in Australian culture. These developments had specific implications for Christian responses to and acceptance of expert knowledge regarding science, health, the environment, and sexuality. Finally, and largely in response to Deverell's keynote, was a dialogue about how churches and theological colleges in both Australia and the US have responded, or not, to the call to "decolonise" ways of knowing.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the symposium and themes examined, it was not possible to find a suitable journal to publish the depth and breadth of these important contributions. We are pleased that Dr Laura Rademaker's and Dr Geoff Treloar's papers have been published in this issue of the *Journal of Religious History*.

Rademaker's paper contributed to the discussion on the history of missions and (de)colonial theologies in Australia. Rademaker examines past issues of the *Nelen Yubu* missiological institute's journal *Nelen Yubu* (meaning "good

6. In 2009 the Uniting Church of Australia revised the preamble of its constitution to acknowledge Aboriginal and Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and the churches complicity in colonisation and dismissal of Indigenous cultural and religious knowledges. The preamble can be read here: <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/137>.

way” in Ngan’gikurunggur) from 1978 to 2002. Rademaker explores the different ways intellectual authority was claimed and upheld by First Nations contributors. She concludes that despite wider national and global discussions regarding Indigenous authority, liberation and self-determination, the pages of *Nelen Yubu*, like the Australian church more broadly, was not a place where these debates were resolved.

Treloar’s paper focuses on the history of theological education in Australia (1964–2020) to analyse how theological education has served to generate and authenticate theological knowledge, yet the legitimacy of that knowledge has been contested in Australian intellectual life. Treloar traces how theological educators have responded to political and social contingencies over the past 50 years, particularly in relation to increasing professionalisation of the sector; curriculum reform; and adjustment to the new possibilities provided by the higher education policies of the state.

We are grateful to all the contributors and participants in this symposium. All demonstrated significant intellectual generosity and willingness to exchange ideas across academic disciplines and theological traditions.

#### *DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT*

Data sharing not applicable.