Australia and Oceania: Practical Theology

Gerard V. Hall

The first thing we need to clarify is the region of which we speak, Australia and Oceania. The first term is reasonably well-defined in terms of political identity as a commonwealth and nation-state with set geographical boundaries. The second, Oceania, consists of thousands of islands and a large number of independent nations spread across the Pacific Ocean. So, is Australia (bounded by Pacific and Indian oceans) within or alongside Oceania? The United Nations lists Australia and New Zealand along with Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia as constituting the region of Oceania. Other sources

1 Gerard Hall: Australia & Oceania – Practical Theology
demonstrate this inclusion from the early nineteenth century. So, while we can legitimately situate Australia within Oceania, we need also ask if Oceania, a concept of European origins, carries any significance outside a large geographical designation (Pascoe 346-347).

Agreeing there is as yet no clearly defined Oceanic identity, there is legitimacy in recognising how European encounter with Oceanic peoples has reshaped and connected the religious and cultural worlds of the region (Swain & Trompf 2). For the purposes of this chapter on regional developments in practical theology, we are speaking only of the English-speaking, south-western Pacific region represented by Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand and Australia. These are specified in view of current membership of the relatively new Association of Practical Theology in Oceania. As yet, neither Micronesia nor French-speaking Polynesia are represented in the Association and so are not covered in this survey. The term ‘Australasia’ is used to speak about Australia and New Zealand as distinct from other ‘Pacific Island’ nations.

The nations of Oceania are mainly products of nineteenth-century European colonization, predominantly by France and Britain. Apart from Tonga, which was never formally colonized, these nations gained independence in the twentieth century: Australia (1901); New Zealand (1907); Samoa (1962); Fiji (1970); PNG (1975); Solomon Islands (1978); Vanuatu (1980). Indigenous populations are mixed according to Aboriginal (Australia), Melanesian (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Australian Torres Strait Islands) and Polynesian (New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga). While
Australasia’s population is mainly of European descent,\(^1\) all other Pacific nations are predominantly Indigenous.\(^2\)

According to most recent census figures, all nations included in this survey are predominantly Christian. In the cases of Australia (64\%) and New Zealand (54\%), processes of secularization since the 1960s have resulted in significant diminishment of self-acclaimed Christian identity – with figures for regular church-attendance in much sharper decline. In other Pacific Islands (with the exception of Fiji with its significant Hindu / Indian population), almost everyone (94\% - 98\%) claims Christian affiliation – and church attendance remains high. This is also the case with Indigenous Fijians. In terms of denominational affiliation: Catholics are the major religion in both Australia (26\%) and PNG (27\%); Anglicans in the Solomon Islands (32\%) and New Zealand (15\%); and traditional Protestant churches in Tonga (Wesleyans 40\%), Fiji (Methodists 36\%), Samoa (Congregationalists 34\%) and Vanuatu (Presbyterian 32\%).\(^3\)

While Pentecostal churches often claim to be the fastest growing religion throughout Oceania, numbers are difficult to verify. They also begin from a very small base. Moreover, in Australasia, they are far outnumbered in both absolute and growth terms by those claiming “no religion” (or leaving the question blank) on their census forms. At the same time, practical expressions of ecumenism among the majority of churches (recently including Pentecostals) are on the rise. Ecumenical cooperation in recent decades is particularly evident in the field of theological education.

\(^1\) Australia (pop. 22 million) with 2.5\% Indigenous; New Zealand (pop. 4 million) with 14\% Indigenous. *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (ABS / census 2006); *Statistics New Zealand* (SNZ / census 2006).

\(^2\) The exception is Fiji (pop. 900,000) with only 51\% Indigenous Fijian and 44\% Indian. *Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics* (FIBS / census 2007).

\(^3\) ABS; SNZ; FIBS; *National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea PNG* (census 2000); *Samoa Department of Statistics* (census 2001); *Tonga Department of Statistics* (census 2006); Solomon Islands & Vanuatu / approximations.
Theological Education: An Overview

Until the 1960s, theological education throughout Oceania found itself in an apartheid situation in relation to other academic fields. All seven Australasian universities established prior to the Second World War excluded theology from their curricula, sometimes by explicit decree. For example, the University of Melbourne Amending Act (1881) explicitly excluded the teaching of ‘Divinity’ and the appointment of clergy as faculty members. While much of the ‘blame’ for this state of affairs is given to the anti-religious rationalism of the times, we must not discount the reality of sectarian bitterness between the churches as equally at fault. In any case, the result was that theology became the domain of individual churches through the establishment of small, multiple and usually isolated seminaries or bible colleges (Sherlock 22 – 25).

Certainly, some seminaries provided degrees for their better students through European universities. Some Catholic seminaries, for example, provided degrees through Catholic Universities in Rome. In 1891 the Anglicans founded an overarching body, the Australian College of Theology, to provide examinations and awards. In 1910 the Melbourne College of Divinity was set up by an Act of State Parliament through which member-colleges could provide state-approved theological degrees. This was the first Australasian venture into anything that could be termed ‘ecumenical’ and ‘government approved’. Nonetheless, institutionally, theological education remained on the academic fringes for well over a century.

---

4 Formal tertiary education in Australasia can be dated to the Universities of Sydney (1850); Melbourne (1853), Otago / Dunedin (1869) and National University of New Zealand (1870). Theological education is dated to Catholic seminaries (Melbourne, 1849; Hobart, 1854), Anglican More College (Sydney, 1856) and Free Presbyterian Theological Hall (Dunedin, 1877).

4 Gerard Hall: Australia & Oceania – Practical Theology
With the burgeoning of new universities throughout Australasia, PNG and Fiji in the 1960s, and the 1965 establishment of the ecumenical-regional Pacific Theological College in Suva (Pascoe 360-361), theology began to emerge into the mainstream of academic life (Sherlock 26-38). Australasian universities opened their doors to the teaching of theology / religious studies; ecumenical consortia sponsored by individual churches were set up in major cities. Some of these were linked to universities or to the already accredited Melbourne College of Divinity; others were government approved and, more recently, government subsidized. Newer colleges and networks, especially Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, have since been established. In the 1990s, Catholic universities were founded in Australia and Papua New Guinea in which theological education is a central dimension of their mission. A significant and rising number of theological students in Australasian universities and theological colleges are from the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Theological education in this part of Oceania continues to be complex and ever-changing (Sherlock 39-63). Typically, theology continues to be taught in non-university denominational or inter-denominational colleges. However, such colleges are invariably linked to universities or theological consortia through which degrees are awarded, academic standards monitored and ecumenical collaboration promoted. We have also seen that many universities now include theology within their curricula. Major trends of theological education include: continued focus on theology in relation to the formation of ordained and/or accredited Christian ministers; service teaching

---

5 The first two Pacific Island universities of the region (Papua New Guinea / Port Moresby) and (The South Pacific / Suva, Fiji) were established in 1965 and 1968 respectively.


7 University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle, 1990); Australian Catholic University (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Ballarat, 1991); Divine Word University (Madang PNG, 1996).

5 Gerard Hall: Australia & Oceania – Practical Theology
for professionals for whom theology is a core requirement of vocational degrees such as teaching, nursing and counselling; and theology’s establishment as an accepted academic discipline in its own right. There is also a continuing trend of people studying theology, often on a part-time basis, to deepen their Christian faith commitment.

**Practical Theology ‘Old’ and ‘New’**

Typically, theology in the Oceania region is marked by focus on practical realities of ministry and pastoral formation. This, however, had little to do with the *discipline* of practical theology. The challenge was to impart knowledge of bible, history and systematic theology to students who were, in the main, heading for ordained ministry in their respective churches. Moreover, the type of theology taught tended to be almost exclusively ‘European’ (‘Down Under’ parlance for Britain, Europe and North America). reflecting something of the colonial cringe as well as the fact that the vast majority of theological teachers were—and still are—educated in Anglo-European or North American theological institutions.

There was little if any attempt to provide a method whereby theology and culture would be brought into mutually critical engagement. Insofar as there was any methodical approach to cultural reality, this usually went under the rubric of ‘pastoral’ or ‘applied’ theology. Such a theology was seen as a by-product or derivative theology translating unchanging theological principles to the practices of pastoral care and ministry (Kelty 122). Given the context of theology’s isolation from society and the academy, little attention was given to its public role.

With the social, cultural, political and ecclesial upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, theology here, as elsewhere, underwent a seismic shift. One important aspect of that shift was the manner in which theology became conscious of its need to engage the world. A new way of understanding and
doing theology emerged giving primacy to praxis, context and culture. In Oceania, such emergence is primarily associated with post-colonial, liberationist and inculturated theologies of the so-called ‘south’. We need to recall it was only in the 1970s that Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (1980), among other Pacific Island countries, became independent. This was also the time of the rise of protest movements in Australia (Aboriginal “Freedom Rides”) and New Zealand (Maori “Land Protest movements”) marking a new consciousness of cultural pride and identity among formerly colonized Indigenous peoples. Theology was being challenged to engage with public and political realities.

This first phase in the birth of the discipline of practical theology is expressed in the movement towards local and contextual theologies. For example, we begin to hear of Aotearoa (the generally accepted Maori term for New Zealand), Rainbow Spirit, Melanesian and Coconut theologies. In the 1970s, *Compass Theology Review* began publishing essays on Australasian theologies and spiritualities. The theme was taken up in the 1978 conference of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Schools (Malone, 1999, 9). Similar directions were pursued by conferences and publications of the Melanesian and South Pacific Associations of Theological Schools, the *Melanesian Journal of Theology* (1985- ) and the *Pacific Journal of Theology* (1989- ) respectively. Significant titles of the 1980s and 1990s capturing this movement towards “local theologies” include: *Living Theology in Melanesia* (D’Arcy May); *The Gospel is not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific* (Trompf); *Discovering an Australian Theology* (Malone); *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Rainbow Spirit Elders).

Although methods used in these theologies are derived from South American liberation theologies, Asian/African theologies of inculturation, European political theologies or North American feminist and black theologies,
the focus on Oceanic cultures is distinctive. Moreover, in dealing with such diversity of local cultures and situations, it is not possible to speak of an Oceanic theology, practical or otherwise. Nonetheless, by the beginning of the third millennium, a new energy for grounding theology in the practical, political and cultural realities of people’s lives was emerging. Not theology – but theologies. Not simply ‘adapting’ the gospel to cultures, but bringing gospel and cultures into mutually critical engagement. In particular, post-colonial contextual theologies critique the once-accepted identification of gospel with European cultural forms. The now-emerging practical theologies of Oceania apply a more radical gospel-culture dialectic to all cultures while engaging with local and global challenges (Bevans 113-114).

**Practical Theology for the Third Millennium**

Redemptorist systematic theologian Tony Kelly points out that initial attempts to discover an Australian theology were devoid of adequate attention to history, especially the historical reality of violence inherent in that culture (Kelly 65-83). In the 1990s, many writings endeavoured to uncover the spiritual landscape of the Australian soul especially through dialogue with Indigenous voices and Australian poetry. In so doing, they acted as a bridge between ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of doing Australian theology. The next phase required more sustained focus on practical-political issues with the aim of developing specific theologies of resistance and hope. In this first decade of the third millennium, Oceania is witnessing the rise of this ‘new’ multi-disciplinary practical theology that engages history, economics and politics as well as poetry, art and philosophy.

However, approaches to practical theology in the universities and theological colleges remain mixed. Some institutions recognise practical theology as a separate and coherent discipline encompassing formation for
ministry as well as the wider dialogue between theology, society, culture and politics. Dual degrees incorporating theology, social work, counselling, social sciences and/or the arts are occasionally offered. Nonetheless, there are few degrees specialising in practical theology—with the exception of degrees in ministry and what is called “practical/applied theology” or “practical ministry.” At the same time, an increasing number of research dissertations are familiar with the methodologies of European and North American practical and empirical theologies, which they employ.

Given the number and variety of theological institutes throughout Oceania, the overarching focus on ministry formation, the still somewhat precarious place of theology in the broader academic landscape, and the ongoing questioning of practical theology as a field in its own right, it is not difficult to see that challenges abound. Moreover, apart from cultural, religious, ethnic and political diversity, there is significant economic disparity throughout the region. The inroads of secularisation, most evident in regard to religious affiliation and practice in Australasia, are increasingly evident in all parts of Oceania. In this sense, shared-if-diverse challenges provoke collaborative responses of which the formation of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania is most significant.

The Association of Practical Theology in Oceania

The Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (APTO) was founded in Brisbane 2003 on the initiative of Brian Kelty and three fellow members of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), namely Gerard Hall, Anne Tuohy and David Pascoe. Within three years membership reached fifty and continues to rise with modest, annual increase. Its members represent a range of professional, academic, and ministerial backgrounds, ecclesial communities and cultural identities. The decision to name the association in terms of
'Oceania' rather than Australia or Australasia was a first for any theological association in this region. It also reflects what New Zealand-born Columban priest Cyril Hally names a “the possible emergence of a new Oceanic identity” aimed at the healing of colonial memories in an ecumenical environment. In turn, this may lead to a new self-understanding of the church’s mission in Oceania (Pascoe 347-348).

Two events assisted the initial promotion of APTO. First was the 2005 IAPT conference in Brisbane which provided opportunity to meet practical theologians from various parts of the world and to focus on issues, approaches and methodologies appropriate for an Oceanic practical theology. The second was the decision to hold the 2006 APTO conference in Auckland as a way of promoting New Zealand / Polynesian participation. Subsequently, annual conferences were held in Melbourne, Auckland, Suva (Fiji) and Brisbane. The 2010 Brisbane conference was held in association with the first Australian “Indigenous Theology Symposium.” The 2011 conference is scheduled for Goroka in the PNG highlands. Holding conferences in various regions creates opportunity to broaden members’ horizons regarding particularities of church, culture and society throughout Oceania. It also has the important practical effect of enabling more inter-regional participation.

Given the diversity of topics, themes and approaches to practical theology evident in the eight conferences already held, a broad category analysis gives prominence to: ecumenical and interreligious dialogue; dialogue with culture and social sciences; reflection on pastoral practice; theological education / formation; healing / reconciliation; spirituality. Other identified areas of significance are: application of doctrine to public policy;
practical theological method; empirical research; application of doctrine to church policy; intercultural ethics.  

Individual APTO conferences highlight themes such as: cultural reconciliation; method and context; eco-theology; Indigenous spiritualities; interreligious encounter. “Health and Healing” and “Social Transformation” were the respective themes of the Melbourne (2007) and Auckland (2008) conferences. Presentations ranged from biblical, philosophical, mystical and classical approaches (in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Aboriginal traditions) to practical-theological reflection in particular contexts of health care, disease, urban transformation, the wounded adolescent, depression, mental health, euthanasia, family trauma / healing, and disability. Post-colonial and intercultural issues were central to presentations on the “Healing of Memories in Oceanic Nations” and “Christian Healing in the Spirit World of Vanuatu.” Reflecting Oceania’s proximity to Asia, post-war Sri Lanka and post-independent East Timor were included as legitimate concerns for an Oceanic practical theology.

“After Chaos, Creation! Local Theologies especially for Oceania and the Pacific Islands” was the theme of the 2009 conference at Pacific Theological College in Suva. This conference focused on issues in the post-colonial Oceanic world facing political upheavals, ecological challenges and forces of globalization. Specific presentations on street preaching in PNG, liturgical inculturation, Melanesian ethics and Indigenous ecological spiritualties gave voice to local and Indigenous Oceanic theologies. The 2010 Brisbane conference, in association with the Indigenous Theology Symposium, naturally gave pride of place to interreligious and intercultural dialogue with particular

8 The results combine two surveys: author’s 2009 questionnaire to members, with some twenty responses; analysis of twenty-one presentations of the 2006 Auckland conference by John Collins.
attention to Aboriginal, Torres Strait and other Indigenous Oceanic voices and perspectives.

Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu
The major voice for and practitioner of practical theology for Papua New Guinea and surrounding Melanesian nations is Divine Word Missionary, Philip Gibbs. Originally from New Zealand, trained in both systematic and contextual theologies as well as anthropology and the social sciences, he develops a practical theology focusing on spiritual, ecological, cultural and political aspects of issues such as HIV/AIDS, land use and acquisition, disability, sorcery and witchcraft. With an eye to the immense cultural, linguistic, geographical and other differences throughout PNG and wider Melanesia, his studies are typically regionally focused, even as he reflects on their broader Oceanic significance. He is also a foremost practical theological educator who provides “theological workshops” for pastors, lay leaders and others involved in hands-on Christian ministry in their respective situations. He writes incisively on the links between narrative and contextual theologies and on specific processes that a “practical contextual theology” needs to employ.

Fiji, Samoa, Tonga
Two Pacific Islanders who focus on local and contextual theologies with particular focus on Fiji and surrounding Polynesian nations are Suva-based Tongan theologians, Kafoa Solomone and Marist Mikaele Paunga. Responding to the 2005 IAPT conference theme “Dreaming the Land,” both pointed to the anomaly of focus on land and forgetfulness of ocean! Oceania, of course, is derived from the very word ‘ocean’; to speak of land in this context is to speak of “a sea of islands” (Solomone). Indeed, “any practical (contextual) theology developed from the Pacific must take into account the Ocean, the Land and the majestic splendour of nature” (Paunga). While experience of land (‘vanua’)
and ocean (‘moana’)—to use Indigenous expressions—across the Pacific Islands is distinctive and needs to be reclaimed, other realities are equally urgent. Among these concerns are rising sea levels, political corruption, economic disparity and proliferation of Pentecostal sects. Ecotheology, ecumenism, inculturation and (especially in Fiji) interfaith dialogue are promoted as important issues for practical theology in the Pacific.

**New Zealand / Aotearoa**

New Zealanders are prominent in developing theologies of engagement between Christian and Indigenous (Maori and other Polynesian) traditions. Neil Darragh provides a helpful annotated bibliography under major focus areas: cultural perspectives (Maori, Pacific, Pakeha—the accepted New Zealand term for people of European descent); issues in society (church and society, education, environment, gender / sexuality, peace and justice, personal wellbeing); church and mission; prayer and spirituality (Darragh / 2002). He has also written extensively on practical, local and contextual theologies with particular attention to method. Making clear distinctions between practical, ‘applied’ and ‘local’ theology, he states: “practical theology...is specifically concerned with a result in transformative local practice rather than knowledge of local theology itself” (Darragh / 2007). He provides a comprehensive six-step process for “doing theology in a practical way” revolving around decisions of starting-point, issue, pivotal question, reading Scripture, response and what he names “making choices”. Evaluative procedures and potential hazards awaiting the theological practitioner are a significant addendum.

**Australia / Australasia**

Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians has emerged as a key issue facing Australia, its peoples, churches and
theologians. Among those who bridge Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island and Christian traditions, Joan Hendriks, Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, Kathy Butler, Robyn Reynolds, Pastor George Rosendale and other Rainbow Spirit Elders associated with Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Northern Australia are prominent. While focusing on issues of intercultural dialogue / reconciliation and a spirituality of land / country, increased attention to social, political and economic issues such as land rights, health, education and just remuneration to members of the ‘stolen generation’ marks this new phase of an emerging Indigenous practical theology. Many of these were prominent at Brisbane’s Indigenous Theology Symposium which focused on Indigenous Spiritualities.

Among other key Australasian voices, Terry Veling’s narrative approach draws on the European hermeneutical tradition, Jewish mysticism, Emmanuel Levinas and wisdom speakers (poets / song writers). Rather than viewing practical theology as a branch of theology, he sees it as integral to all theology, reconnecting theory and practice, thought and life. Providing an Asian perspective is Sri Lankan-born Anglican priest, Ruwan Palapathwala, who provides intercultural and interreligious perspectives on issues ranging from globalization to spirituality of the aged. Foremost voice for empirical theology is Paul McQuillan whose studies focus on youth spirituality. Henare Tate provides a systematic account of the encounter between traditional Maori and Christian spiritualities. John Collins is seeking to develop a coherent method for practical theology on the basis of Bernard Lonergan. A contrasting approach is Mary Eastham’s commitment to public theology in the New Zealand context using the theological method of John Courtney Murray. Increasingly, Indigenous voices across the region are finding a space in the world of practical theology more in tune with their cultural, ecclesial and political aspirations.
Conclusion

As this chapter indicates, practical theology as a formal discipline in Oceania is still in an embryonic phase. Much of this is explicable in terms of the sheer vastness and diversity of a region with no clearly defined identity beyond shared geography on a map. There are other factors such as colonisation at a particular time in history when the secular ethos of the colonists kept theology / religion in the private sphere. Consequently, it was only in the 1960s that theological education began the formidable process of establishing itself alongside other academic disciplines. Until then, and even now, theology’s primary role was seen in terms of ministry formation. While much has changed in the past few decades—ecumenical cooperation, government support of theological institutes, and university promotion of theology / religious studies within its curricula—the discipline of practical theology is still not well understood. The tendency in many programs is simply to equate practical theology with pastoral and applied theologies or ministry studies.

However, this chapter has also traced a promising trend for the future of practical theology. It, too, began in the 1960s with considerable energy for dialogue between theology and culture. The development of local theologies is an important first step, especially in the post-colonial affirmation of Indigenous cultures. The second step consists in developing contextual theologies that engage more dialectically with church, culture and society. Their aim is transformative social praxis. Recent practical theologies represented in voices of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania have moved in this direction. Enlisting academic tools of the social sciences, they focus on issues such as health, reconciliation, education, public policy, globalization and the environment. They may also be a catalyst for the emergence of a new Oceanic identity and the revitalisation of Christian mission as prophetic dialogue (Hally / Pascoe 347-348; Hall).
Index terms

**Geographical**: Oceania, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, Australasia, Pacific Islands

**Countries**: Australia, New Zealand / Aotearoa, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga

**Names**: Cyril Hally, Philip Gibbs, Neil Darragh, Rainbow Spirit Elders, Joan Hendriks, Kafoa Solomone, Mikaele Paunga, Terry Veling, Ruwan Palapathwala, Paul McQuillan, John Collins, Mary Eastham, David Pascoe, Brian Kelty, Tony Kelly, Henare Tate

**Concepts**: Indigenous cultures; inculturation; reconciliation; prophetic dialogue; social transformation; eco-theology; Oceanic identity; theological education; secularization; globalization; ecumenism; interfaith dialogue; prophetic dialogue

**Theologies**: pastoral, applied, local, narrative, contextual, public, post-colonial, practical, liberation, political, Indigenous, empirical

---

**Bibliography**


Veling, Terry, A. *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2005.

___

**Note:** An amended version of this paper occurs as a chapter entitled “Practical Theology in Australia and Oceania” in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), Ch. 52, pp. 544-554.