ARTHUR CAPELL AND SOME COLLEAGUES:
ANTHROPOLOGY, LINGUISTICS, PHILOSOPHY
AND THE AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

W. J. Jobling

In introducing this study I need to emphasize that it is part of a wider research project which is concerned with three Australian writers and thinkers and their contribution to the Australian Religious Tradition. Arthur Capell, the object of this introductory study, is the first of this trio. The other two are his mentor, fellow priest and long time colleague Professor A.P. Elkin and the Reverend G. Stuart Watts, sometime editor of *The Church Standard*, Andersonian philosopher, lecturer and, importantly for this study, publisher of a collection of Capell’s articles entitled, “A Scientific Approach to Christianity” (1946). All three knew one another and were Anglican priests. Also, roughly speaking they were of the same generation. Capell was born in 1902, Elkin in 1891 and Watts in 1899.

Capell died in 1986, Elkin in 1979, and Watts in 1988. All three lived long lives which spanned important eras in modern world history. Not least was this so in the revolutions in ideas and society which they witnessed. It is my contention that their thinking and teaching as preserved in their often neglected “religious” writings, once assembled and analyzed, provide important insights not only into their own histories but also their place in the development of an Australian religious tradition.

In a recent and very helpful survey about Australian religious thought Professor Bruce Mansfield argued that: “Australian Christianity has had a strongly intellectualized and institutional character”. (Mansfield 1989:332). Having pointed out that “the denomination has been ‘the natural and predominant context’ for religious life”, Mansfield writes that it may seem surprising that “Australian Christianity has had a strongly intellectualized character” (1989:334). He adds that “For many an air of anti-intellectualism still hangs over everything Australian” (ibid). However, rather than accept the cultural, or should one say, theological, cringe implied in this, Mansfield rightly points out that Australian Christianity “belongs to a stage in the history of Christianity where, however important the cult and personal piety may be, faith has to be put into statements, for acceptance or rejection”. It is as a response and significant contribution to this history that I would argue that the theological writings of Capell, Elkin and Watts belong.
This, may easily be illustrated at the popular level by the self identification I encountered talking to many Australian cattlemen of north west Queensland and the Northern Territory. When meeting a parson for the first time they usually identified themselves as "Bush baptists" (Wilkes 19:). This was meant to be a jocular but also derogatory self definition. At a popular urban level David Millikan in his book entitled the *Sunburnt Soul* portrays much the same attitude though it interesting that he quotes from Henry Lawson's poem *Shearers*:

"They tramp in mateship side by side-
The Protestant and Roman-
They called no biped lord or sir
And touch their hat to no man!" (1981:74)

My aim in this and subsequent studies on A.P. Elkin and G.Stuart Watts is to explore the writings and thought of three Australian Anglican priests and academics with a view to these issues and their place in the religious thinking of Australian Christianity.

**Arthur Capell and A.P. Elkin**

Early in his academic career in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, Arthur Capell gathered together several articles that he had published in the now defunct Anglican journal *The Church Standard* and published them under the title of *A Scientific Approach to Christianity*. This journal was then under the editorship of the Reverend G. Stuart Watts. Later, when Watts had become a follower of Professor John Anderson's philosophy, he was to spend much of his life teaching for the WEA and Adult Education Department Of the University of Sydney.

At this stage in his writing Capell's method is clearly enunciated in the statement that,

"As wise men, therefore, we are setting out to examine the evidence, sifting and judging it by the criteria by which we can judge truth in the world about us, and using the evidence which research and discovery place at our disposal" (Capell 1946:1).

This statement by Capell would seem to merit an empiricist classification. However, in comparing the study of religion and science he
remarks: "Science aims at the establishment of general laws. That being so, once the law has been reached, legitimate science cannot go behind it and ask why that law exists. That is the problem of philosophy and religion. Science has rendered us so many physical benefits, and has so changed the tenor of our daily lives, that we are inclined to ask from it more than it can give" (Capell 1946:2). Thus when he considered what he called "spiritual facts of existence" (Capell 1946:2), Capell argued that many empiricists were attempting to apply the scientific method in a way that was incompatible with the realities under scrutiny. Thus he stated, "Religious truths must be examined by different means. The two categories (i.e. science and religion) are distinct, even though all truth is ultimately one" (ibid). Further he asserted: "Philosophy, strictly speaking, is the human side of the search for ultimates, of which religion is the divine side from which those ultimates are revealed as far as human intellect can take them in" (Capell 1946:3).

Having to a large extent grown up in the world of idealism which is rooted in the Classical scholarship in which he distinguished himself at the University of Sydney, Capell then proceeded to the University Of London for research in Comparative Linguistics in order to equip himself for what was to become an outstanding career in field work and publications in Australian Aboriginal and Pacific Linguistics. In this regard he continued his study and critical thinking in an area of research which had by then developed rapidly under the influence of Darwinism. Towards the end of his remarks on the standard arguments for the existence of God he wrote that "no evolutionary theory can do more than explain a process — it leaves the cause of the evolution undefined" (Capell 1946:5). Thus in the light of his presentation and treatment of the arguments for the existence of God, Capell could turn to the powerful Darwinianism and argue that "we are brought to the increasing probability that behind the entire universe lie both intelligence and purpose. That is the fundamental postulate of the theistic position, and we hold that in no other way can the universe be made to make sense" (Capell 1946:5). In following this line of the need "to make sense", he argued that in the case of the relationship of science and religion he was trying to "change the usual line of the approach to the problem of God. Having proved that he cannot be mathematically proved, I want to show that unless he is real, the universe does not make sense — that He is the ultimate postulate that every type of science must make. I am arguing that Nature — to use for the moment the impersonal term — must be judged by her highest postulate namely, man. If man makes sense, then the inanimate universe has a hope of making sense.
If man does not make sense in himself, then the rest of existence has no such hope" (Capell 1946:7).

This anthropological orientation in Capell's thinking is further illustrated by his rhetorical question:

"Truth, beauty, goodness, a feeling for eternity in many and varied forms — are all these things which are part of the differentiae between man and animals, all deceptive? All that lifts man above the animals, makes it increasingly impossible to regard him as purely material. His abstractive powers, his reaching out for things greater than himself, all these in spite of himself, argue a non-material principle within himself, and that in turn cries out for a God to satisfy it." (Capell 1946:8).

These thoughts were expressed by Arthur Capell while in the earlier stages of his long career in the Department of anthropology at the University of Sydney. Here he was in harness with Professor A.P. Elkin.

Capell's association with Professor Elkin is well illustrated in the latter's introductory remarks to the volume of *Pacific Linguistic Studies* which was published in honour of Capell at the time of his retirement. Having mentioned Capell's distinguished career at North Sydney High School, where his name is recorded on the School's Honour Roll of distinguished old boys, Elkin recorded that

"He had gained a brilliant Leaving Certificate Pass and had capped this by graduating in 1922 as University medallist in Classics. After Graduation Capell became a High School teacher for three years. He was ordained into the ministry of the Church of England in 1925, and held positions in the Diocese of Newcastle for the next ten years, and since then has assisted in Church work from time to time. He has served on Missionary Boards and is an Honorary Canon of the Cathedral at Dogura, Papua. He was invited to be Bishop of a North Australian Diocese (an invitation which I helped him decide to decline), and of a missionary Diocese. Long before this, it had become clear that linguistics was the field in which he could make his best contribution to knowledge and to educational and missionary work" (p.1.)

In the conclusion of his tribute, Elkin noted the long association that had existed between them. "Moreover, he lives near to me and so our friendship
and our close association and mutual understanding in work begun in 1932, built up in the Department of Anthropology, and enriched in the field, goes on unabated. Though retired we both press on” (p.7).

At the time of Elkin's death Capell responded, as it were, with a two page tribute entitled *Honoris Causa*. He outlined Elkin’s early career in a way that emphasized the role played by both the praxis and study of religion. Capell noted that

"A.P. Elkin became in his day a figure of world fame — and the remarkable thing is that he never intended to be an anthropologist. He is one of those who have greatness thrust upon him. He would have achieved outstanding honour in whatever course he may have followed, but had he not been led into anthropological study not only would science have been the poorer, but the Aborigines of Australia — and peoples elsewhere — would have missed much that they needed” (p.162).

Having outlined Elkin's career in the bank and then his achievements at The University of Sydney where he graduated with First Class Honours in Philosophy in 1915 and then First class Honours MA in 1922, Capell noted that “in 1916 he became a priest of the Church of England, and started a career as a ‘country parson’, going about on horse back in the district of Gundy in the Upper Hunter, NSW.” Then in 1918 he visited Bourke, and made contact with the aborigines of the region, and also with the implements and burial sites of Aborigines, which turned his thoughts to Australian Anthropology. “The interest was increased by his term as Parish Priest at Wollombi, where there were rich relics of the Aboriginal past. This changed his outlook. Meanwhile he had become Vice-Warden of St.John's Theological College, then at Armidale.” However having noted this change in outlook, Capell recorded that after his transfer in 1933 to the University of Sydney as Professor of Anthropology, Elkin “interested himself in local history: his work, *Morpeth and I*, told the story of the last parish of which he was in charge, and his 827-page *The Diocese of Newcastle* (1955), is a monumental work on the first period of the Church in that area” (p.163). Capell brought his tribute to a close with the words of R.M. and C.H. Berndt, who edited the Elkin Festschrift in 1964, that Elkin was “a great Australian” (p.163).

For the purposes of this study I must focus on the series of articles originally published in *The Church Standard* in 1946 and later that year
published as a collection under the title *A Scientific Approach to Christianity*. The chapters of this booklet were entitled, 1: Modern Science and the Idea of God; 2: God and Evolution; 3: Human Reason and the Search for God; 4: The Nature of God; 5: God and Christianity.

Having reaffirmed that in his view "Science can provide us with sufficient evidence to justify belief in God, although the evidence always stops short of full proof" (p.33), Capell goes on to discuss the significance of Jesus as described in the New Testament documents and his place in personal religion:

"Finally, the documents claim that He can and will take charge of any human life that is given unreservedly to Him, and that no life not under His control can be in the long run satisfactory" (p.35).

To this teaching Capell addresses the questions, "What is to be the answer to all this? That it isn't scientific and so is irrelevant to the modern world?" (ibid.) Having acknowledged that "that seems to be the prevailing attitude" (ibid.), Capell then answers, "True, it is not scientific in the sense of being something science can investigate by physical means and prove or disprove; but then, human, as against material, problems are very rarely scientific in this sense" (ibid). In my view this answer involves a shift in his argument which, while staying close to his high view of scientific method, introduces a move which in the end may shed light on his position.

This position is interestingly illuminated in Elkin’s theological writings in an article published in the journal *The Morpeth Review* some sixteen years earlier. *The Morpeth Review* was published quarterly by the St John’s College Press, Morpeth, sub-titled *A Review of Life and Work*, under the editorship of E.H. Burgmann, R.S. Lee and Elkin. Within this “liberal” Anglican context, Elkin published three articles on Christian Ritual which were based on lectures he had given to the Goulburn Diocesan School of Sacred Study and the Maitland Clerical Society in 1932. Thus, concerning rituals associated with initiation Elkin wrote:

"But you might ask, are we told that the Christian Sacraments are historically connected with the world of thought of Mystery Cults and Egyptian rites of death and life? I should answer yes, but they come to us through Jesus Christ, through what He was and what He did. And what is fascinating to the anthropologist about the New Testament is its primitiveness in the best sense of that term — its
lack of Jewish specialization — its return to wider views, and to the more general lines of religious thought. Thus it is that our Lord, like Christianity, can appeal to all the nations and gather them to Himself.

Of course, the objection might be made that such a view is giving the case to the so-called Rationalists, to those who would see nothing in Christianity but the watered down survival of a vegetation-cult or of ancestor worship. My own experience, however, says, that this is not so, and that experience seems to me to be justified by the logic of reason. Further, the more we enter into the spirit and meaning of these ancient cults, both in their ritual act, moral teaching the more real does Christian experience become, not as the negation of those other cults but as their fulfilment. It is the richness of the Catholic faith that grips us — scholar, priest, and member of the congregation alike — and that richness includes, and guides and satisfies that great urge of the human race for life, which in its highest form, is a religious urge for life eternal" (The Morpeth Review, Vol.2, No. 22, 1932, p.55.)

It is perhaps pertinent to note that these sorts of theoretical issues place Capell and Elkin in the stream of theologians and thinkers who were concerned with the development of a theology which could show an appreciation of the perspectives of science and to some extent take on board what science had to offer theology and the life of the Church. Yet it is clear that while doing this Capell was nevertheless trying to remain within a frame of theological reference which maintained a priority for revelation understood as not directly given through scripture but provided through the more catholic combination of the interactive processes of tradition and scripture within the worshipping community of the Church.

There can be no doubt that as far as his personal life and devotions were concerned there was always a stable basis provided by the recitation of the Daily Offices of the Anglican liturgical tradition as well as a well developed and Anglo-Catholic sacramentalism centred on the Eucharist.

In my view Elkin was much more than just the Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology in which Capell worked; there was a relationship between them of respect and on Capell's part admiration. It was Elkin who saw what Capell was capable of academically and in a way the important formative path of higher degrees and research and publication followed by Capell were outlined by Elkin. In particular, he followed Elkin's
advice and made his way to London University to read for a PhD in Anthropology.

As a priest Capell had come into a close relationship with Elkin and the Morpeth College through his curacy at St James Church Morpeth from 1932 to 1935. (Elkin, *Morpeth and I*, pp.122-123). Elkin had succeeded Canon Withycombe who had been transferred to Mayfield by Bishop Long. By this time Elkin had already served in the parishes of Gundy, Wallsend and Woolombi as well as Vice-Warden of St John's College, Armidale; he had also completed twelve months' anthropological field work in North-West Australia. It was during the period of Capell's curacy that Elkin in 1933 was appointed first lecture-in-charge and then Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. During this time at Morpeth Capell was exposed to Elkin's interesting and vigorous life, a life which embraced several spheres of intellectual endeavour as well as the praxis of parish life. It is for this reason that I have focussed on the religious and theological writings of Elkin in *The Morpeth Review* of 1932 to 1933.

Another important mind with whom Capell was familiar at this time was the Reverend R.S. Lee. As noted, it was Roy Lee along with E.H. Burgmann and Elkin who edited *The Morpeth Review*. Until the election to the Diocese of Newcastle of Bishop de Witt Batty, Lee had considerable influence in the formation of young priests and was highly regarded. His major interest was in the emerging area of the psychology of religion. Later he was to publish *Freud and Christianity* (1948) and other books in this area. However, during the period from 1932 to 1933 it is worth noting that Lee published an article in *Morpeth Review* (Volume 2, Number 23) entitled "Capitalism", a paper he had already read to the Clerical Society of West Maitland. Indeed much of that issue was devoted to issues of a similar kind. There was an article by Burgmann on "Property and Morals", an article by F.R. Easton on "Christianity and Socialism", an article by G.V. Portus on "Socialization" and one by F.A. Bland of The University of Sydney on "Citizenship". Bland concluded his article with a plea against obscurantism at the public level and the importance of the individual and his private and public standards. He wrote: "In all he [the individual] does he must ask himself how far those things are according to the mind which is in Christ Jesus, tested according to the twin principles of the sanctity of human
personality, and of corporate social responsibility, which were the foundations of His Social Gospel" (Bland, 1933: 27).1

Much of Lee's writing in The Morpeth Review are informed by an interest in the implications of psychology for religion and the shaping of theology. His research and study led him into an appreciation of the need for theological re Evaluations of religious and social praxis that made some of his theological pronouncements unacceptable in the mind of his diocesan, Bishop de Witt Batty. As one reviews the writings of Lee there is a temptation to see something of the same process of thought which has appeared in recent work on the sociology of religion, especially in the writings of Peter Berger such as The Sacred Canopy: (1969).

While Burgman, Elkin and Lee directed The Morpeth Review towards issues such as "civilization", "socialism", "technocracy", "unemployment", "property and morals", "economics and ethics", there was also a definite move towards an appreciation of what today are understood as the processes of socialization and the role of social structure in relation to religion and theology.2 The church world of Morpeth of which Capell was a part reached far beyond its village boundaries to the outside world in terms of ideas and influence.

Although various judgements have been made about the churchmanship of Elkin and his theological commitments, it is important to note that he was very active in writing about Church matters, both at the historical and quasi religious-theological levels, throughout his career. In his retirement he continued to play an important part in chairing committees which were associated with the Church. He was a Fellow of St. Paul's College, the oldest Anglican university college in Australia, from 1935 to 1966 and Chairman of Council in 1960 and from 1962 to 1966.

1 I came to know Professor Bland in his latter days at Strathfield where I was serving my curacy. He played a prominent role in the economic policies developed by Sir Arthur Fadden. Sir William McMahon had been one of his students.

2 On the process of socialisation in relation to religion see J.R. Isenberg in The Study of Early Christianity, pp.29-49.
In her biography of Elkin, Tigger Wise has recorded that when he had finally retired to the Mowll Memorial Village his old student from St John's College Morpeth, the Rev'd Edgar Cutcliffe, “recalled that he never once saw him in the chapel” (p.259). Similarly I can remember being told that Elkin had really “given it all away” as far as his Anglican orders and faith were concerned. When I asked Capell about this he said without reservation that this was not true, and that such a view had often been formed of Elkin because he, like Capell, had always been kept at arm's length by the Diocese of Sydney in which they had both lived out their academic careers. Intellectually and ecclesiastically they did not fit in with the dominant traditions of the Diocese of Sydney. As highly placed university figures, their breadth of approach to religious issues contrasted with the largely restricted intellectual stance of Sydney evangelicalism. As churchmen, their practice and sympathies — Capell, worshipping and ministering in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of Christ Church, St Lawrence, and Elkin, a liberal of middle to High church persuasion — were equally out of step with prevailing views in the Diocese.

It is interesting to note, however, that whereas Capell was honoured with a Canonry in Dogura Cathedral in New Guinea, no similar form of recognition was forthcoming from the wider Church for Elkin. Perhaps this was because Elkin was in a sense too radical, or had become too secularized in his theological views. As far as his general theological background was concerned it may be that like other scholars such as S.G.F. Brandon he was of that old liberal High Church associated with Bishop Gore. There is good evidence that this tradition of Anglican thought was strongly represented and well respected in the Australian church. Elkin, while not espousing the ritual side of this High Church movement, certainly did embrace its interest in the interface of the Church's thinking with the developments of science and the new cosmology this has implied.

3 See David Garnsey’s recent biography of Canon Arthur Garnsey who was Warden of St. Paul’s College within the University of Sydney.
4 A good example of this is now to be found in Professor Hanbury Brown’s recent book, The Wisdom of Science, in which he has a final chapter on religion and theology. Perhaps links with similar streams of interest in England within the Anglican Church tradition can be made with the writing and scholarship of Alec Vidler and with certain emphases in the writings of Professor Maurice Wiles and Don Cupit.
In his retirement Arthur Capell had the opportunity to begin writing up a theology. He approached this project by producing a plan or outline in the form of two diagrams which were linked to each other and formed a kind of flow chart. He began a programmatic presentation of his writing with a series of articles in the *Australian Church Quarterly* in 1971. This first article was entitled, “What Theology Is”, and was followed by other articles entitled “The Fugal Pattern of Theology” (June, 1971), “The Historical Pattern of Theology” (March, 1972) and “Paul Tillich and the Theology of Being” (December, 1972).

For the purposes of this paper it is interesting to compare Capell’s article “What Theology Is” with his 1946 publication “A Scientific Approach To Christianity”. Twenty five years later in “What Theology Is” Capell argued that theology is the study of God and His ways with men. “Christianity is the study of what God has done for us in Christ. Its basic form was laid down by our Lord in His first public lecture on apologetics, the lecture on the Emmaus Road. All its developments since then have been concerned with the increase of understanding of these basic facts. The understanding has often come through the examination of what proved to be errors: the method of trial and error in human affairs is hard to avoid. The task of theology is to make explicit what is applied in the statements of the Bible and the life of the Church. The history of Christian doctrine in the earliest centuries is available in many handbooks. These studies will therefore be concerned with what is going on around us in the twentieth century, where much of importance is happening. Many thinkers are trying afresh to analyse and interpret the faith of the Church. Here, too, it is inevitable that there will be errors, as well as gains, and these we shall try to assess, as they are seen in the work of some of the thinkers of the Western Churches today” (p.16).

Capell had begun this article with the account of Jesus' post resurrection appearance to two disciples on the Emmaus road and commented on the words “He began from Moses and all the prophets and explained to them the passages which referred to Himself in every part of the Scriptures”:

"This is what Christian theology is: the explanation of the records of what God has done for the world in and through Christ. Theology is literally talk about God. There can, of course, be a theology of any religion at all, but for Christians, naturally, it must be Christian theology. The problem for us is: “What is true Christianity?” What has the Church to understand, believe, proclaim and preach about Him? For us, there are thus two branches of theology: proclamation
and preaching. The Greek terms which have become popularized in the last few decades are *kerygma* and *didakhe*, the New Testament terms for proclaiming a historical message and teaching doctrine" (p.11).

In a simple way Capell emphasized in these remarks his continuing commitment to the descriptive method. He also focussed on the linguistic processes involved in "talk about God" but more importantly he further stated a commitment to the examination and understanding of theology as a living process: "If we believe that the Holy Spirit still lives and works in the Church and keeps the promise made for Him, we cannot overlook the force of Christian Tradition, even while we do not exalt it into a completely controlling power" (p15) "... However it is still a commitment which realistically embraces a view which comprehends 'errors as well as gains' that need to be assessed" (p16). In these words Capell expresses a measure of pragmatism about the way we should view the Christian tradition in its details. It is an approach which is traceable in my view to his pragmatic approach to linguistic theory and the realities of the kinds of linguistics, in particular anthropological field work linguistics. Arthur Capell's theological and religious writings owe much to his realization that language is never independent of other social realities. In his writing there emerges an awareness of the social construction of theological thinking and expression and of the ways in which "talk about God" is created, communicated and sustained through language and symbol.

Commenting on the diagrammatic representation of his theology, Capell likened the enterprise to a "fugue", arguing that "this is exactly what the course of Christian Theology has been — voices pursuing voices, yet often not according to any predictable contrapuntal rules but in the apparent chaos of human will, good, or otherwise" (*ACQ*, June 1971:11). Following on this fugue metaphor, he also argued that for theology "there is a determiner of the pattern over and above man, and that determiner is God" (ibid). Thus he concluded, "Like the language in which theological discussions must take place, the features are linear and horizontal, unlike the 'vertical' harmonies of a chord. Yet even in language, phonetic sounds, stresses and tones occur 'vertically' together at one time. So in theological discussion more than one feature may be present at a time — and often it is just the harmony that is missing" (*ACQ* p.11).
Of particular interest in exploring and sketching Capell's apparent commitment to scientific method, and in contrast to his 1946 writing, we find that in his 1972 discussion of what he termed "the historical pattern of theology" he writes: "Two very different interpretations of existence are possible. It is difficult to assign names to them — at least without bias or special connotations. The one way may be called the scientific and the other the religious. Perhaps the former might be called the 'humanist' as an alternative; the contrast is between a universe which is its own cause and effect, and a universe brought into being by a Higher Power independent of it. Between them, some might reckon philosophy which aims at establishing a final truth which will synthesize all approaches. The first view seeks to discover and understand laws governing the world so impersonally that the idea of God becomes unnecessary, as Laplace stated it when he presented to Napoleon his model of the universe, and Napoleon replied, 'Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis'. This view is man centred" (ACQ 1972:22).

The Reverend G. Stuart Watts

The early intellectual and clerical life of the Rev'd G. Stuart Watts is marked by his study and preparation for the Methodist Ministry at Leigh College, Enfield. The intellectual and doctrinal climate of Leigh College as a denominational tertiary institution concerned with the preparation of ordinands still needs to be assessed, though it is possible to say that as far as Watts was concerned he seems to have been attracted to the more liberal theological climate that had emerged in the early part of the century. Certainly his personal and intellectual devotion to Professor Samuel Angus, especially as demonstrated at the time of the Presbyterian Church's heresy charges against Professor Angus, indicates a very strong commitment to intellectual freedom in theological research and speculation.

Stuart Watts's pilgrimage in the Methodist Church ended in his resignation as a Methodist Minister early in 1927. He went to prepare for Anglican Orders at St John's Anglican College, Morpeth, which was then under the principalship of E.H. Burgman. His association with Burgman and his circle at Morpeth probably needs to be assessed as extending both before and beyond this period. Stuart Watts was made a Deacon, October 16, 1927 and then ordained a Priest by Bishop W.F. Wentworth-Shields for the
Diocese of Armidale on March 11, 1928. The Methodist background was an important link with Capell who had been a Methodist layman.

As noted before, Capell was ordained in 1925 in the Diocese of Newcastle. Both Capell and Watts followed the Anglo-Catholic traditions of their respective Dioceses, and even in later life, maintained the strict disciplines associated with the priestly life especially insofar as the Daily Offices and the celebration of the Eucharist were concerned. H.D. Nicholson and Mrs Sadie Watts have both told me that Stuart Watts daily read through the Eucharist, even after he had ceased to function in a parish, or was associated with any particular altar where he could have said Mass.5

Watts served as the curate of Tamworth in the Diocese of Armidale in 1927, and then as the incumbent of Nambucca in the Diocese of Grafton from 1929. He held a General Licence in the Diocese of Sydney from 1933. He was also curate in charge of Casino from 1940 to 1947. From the point of view of tracing his theological publications and the climate of theological thinking both in Australia and overseas, his period as Editor of The Church Standard, from October 7, 1933 to March 8, 1940 was most important.

In 1982, when his book, The Revolution of Ideas: Philosophy, Religion and Some Ultimate Questions, appeared, Watts was described by the publishers as having been, “editor of The Church Standard, and assistant priest at St James’s Church, King Street, Sydney”. “Stuart Watts,” they noted, “vigorously attacked theological illiberalism and social injustice. Improved conditions for the unemployed resulted, and an anti-slum crusade was launched. Always a Liberal Independent, he won the co-operation in these activities of people in all Churches and in most political parties. The leading British Church newspaper, Church Times, praised The Church Standard as 'most competently edited', and appointed him as its Australian correspondent; while Dr. Alec Vidler, editor of British Theology, selected him as the journal's editorial representative in Australia.”

Watt’s writings as an Anglican priest who worked at the coal-face of parish life are especially interesting in the light of the intellectual and social concerns which had been expressed in the The Morpeth Review under the

5 The light-weight set of Eucharist vestments which he always carried with him as a chaplain in the Australian Army are now in my possession.
editorship of Burgman, Elkin and Lee. Watt's *Open Letter to the Australian Episcopate*, which was printed as a 12-page booklet when Watts was Rector of Casino in the Diocese of Newcastle in 1942, is of particular interest. In his opening remarks Watts wrote that he was concerned with an "attempt to try and work out a synthesis between traditional faith and modern knowledge" (p.1). He argued amongst other things that "The fact, never yet officially faced by the Church, is that the whole edifice of orthodox Christology collapsed with the the decay of the fundamental dogma of the Fall. Ever since, we have been engaged in frantic and futile attempts to rebuild the house on shifting sands. Surely it is time to turn to more profitable activities" (p.8). Advocating a searching but nevertheless constructive review of theological thinking and social praxis Watts pointed to what he called "the Master's love of justice", (a phrase commonly used by the Presbyterian ministers who espoused the cause of Professor Samuel Angus), as grounds for "Priests who have identified themselves with the struggle of the poor for social justice, and who have hailed the Soviet experiment as the most constructive effort of all time to establish a fair and just economic order, have been branded as 'Bolsheviks' and accused of being disloyal, anti-Christian, and whatnot. Even now the sympathies of multitudes of professing Christians are with Hitler rather than with Stalin, despite the fact that the Red Army and the Russian people are the only effective barrier against the forces of Fascist oppression at the present time. In view of her obsequious deference to the privileged classes, and her flagrant nationalism, it is not surprising that the Church has failed dismally as an organ of world peace" (p.9). He concluded his *Open Letter* with the words "We are sure that the Church is at the crossroads, and that she must choose either to return to the authoritarianism of Rome or to go forward with the most enlightened thought of the day to win the world for rationality and noble idealism" (p.12).

The *Open Letter* was followed up a little later that year with response to the criticisms of both the Anglican Episcopate and other clergymen and laymen with a 14 page publication entitled *Why I Believe: The Rational Basis of Religious Faith*. Interestingly, this was dedicated to Professor Samuel Angus with the words, "Who first taught me to think honestly and fearlessly, and whose Christ-like character and devotion to Truth have been an unfailing inspiration through the years". The cover to *Why I Believe* was illustrated with a quotation from another great influence in Watt's intellectual firmament, Professor Kirsopp Lake: "After all, Faith is not belief in spite of evidence, but life in scorn of consequence — a courageous trust in the the
great purpose of things and pressing forward to finish the work which is in
sight whatever the price maybe”. Watts went on to argue that “The method
in religion in the main has been the exact opposite of the scientific method.
It has started with some ‘revealed truth’, defining it in a series of dogmatic
propositions and attempting to justify it and to relate it to life. When reason
proves recalcitrant, it is branded as intellectual pride or, in Luther’s vigorous
phrase, ‘that whore’ and is consigned to outer darkness” (p.1). With regard to
his critics Watts argued that as far as his exposition of the Christian Faith
was concerned: “If we still must have a Christology framed in purely logical
terms let us base it not on ancient Hebrew myths but on the fact of
evolution which from the religious point of view is the long and painful
ascent of the human mind to fellowship with God” (p.2).

With regard to what we might call the applied theology of the parish and
diocesan life of the time, Watts wrote of the criticisms he had made of the
Glebe holdings of the Diocese of Sydney: “I have no hesitation in saying
that a diocese which lets property on long-term leases without adequate
safeguards for the living conditions and general well being of its tenants is a
diocese with a very poor sense of responsibility for its people. It is a
damning fact that even when the state of squalor and decay was realized by
the authorities, no determined move was made to end, at all costs, this
crucifixion of Christ in the persons of his poor; further that long after
reversion to full Church control, it was (as many tenants complained bitterly
to me) difficult to get the owners to effect even the most essential repairs”
(p.3).

Watts, at least in his writings of the 1940’s described himself as a
“Modernist” Anglican clergyman. He also drew attention to the Roman
Catholic Modernists such as Fr.Tyrrell whom he quoted with regard to the
statements in the Creed: “The Trinitarian and Christological statements, as
Fr. Tyrrell pointed out, possess an imaginative and devotional and practical
value”; they ‘dimly shadow forth a truth that defies definition, yet excludes
Unitarianism, Arianism, Tritheism, Sabellianism, and every similar
impertinence of metaphysical curiosity. It is not as theological, but as anti-
theological, that the creed has a protective value’, he continues, ‘It pulverizes
every attempt at a rationalistic and literal explanation of purely prophetic
utterances’ (Scylla and Charybdis, p.343).” (Watts, 1982: 10).

Interestingly it is worth noting that while Watts in 1942 designated
himself as a Modernist his appreciation of traditional Catholic doctrine still
enabled him to write: “If we are to retain the terminology of past ages, I should say that those values are preserved far more effectively the Trinitarian formula than by the Unitarian. The Unitarian conception of God stresses his oneness, whilst the Trinitarian emphasizes the variety-in-unity of the Divine Being and sees in the rich variety of nature a dim reflection of the 'many coloured wisdom of God', as St. Paul calls it. The doctrine of the Trinity, that the One God, the One Supreme Reality, is found in hypostasis was formulated in a remote age; yet it approaches more closely than any other ancient doctrine our modern ideas of God and the universe. It is a subtle and difficult doctrine, of which popular orthodoxy, as a rule, is blissfully ignorant; and we hold it to be probably true. We believe that in our Lord a divine hypostasis (or essential element of the divine life) was manifested to men” (p.7).

H.D. Nicolson commenting on the theology of Stuart Watts has noted that: “After World War II Stuart Watts was convinced that the rational arguments for the existence of God, which had underpinned his faith, and the rational views of many clergy and lay people, could not be sustained. He did not feel his faith was diminished, but shifted in need of reformation ... He insisted that his views were not to be labelled atheistic and left numerous efforts at reformation of which his book is only the latest and the most coherent”. Nicolson, a longstanding member of the Sydney Philosophy Club and at one time an ordinand for the Presbyterian Ministry at St Andrew's College within the University of Sydney, has also noted that “Stuart Watts's early studies in Greek had given him an understanding of Plato's and Aristotle's outlook. He maintained an interest in modern philosophy, fixed by his valuing of John Anderson's positive theory of Ethics and his critical work on many other issues. He was also friendly with Professor Alan Stout and supported him on many social reform issues. Nevertheless he wanted to use a modified view of Plato's Theory of Forms, treated naturalistically and realistically ... as the chief approach to Theology and Humane studies, seen as the broad intellectual search for an encompassing view of the ‘way things are’ He differed from John Anderson's central view of the role of proposition and facts and Wittgenstein's later views which he regarded as giving too much emphasis to language as opposed to discourse or dialectic... His full philosophic position is not worked out, but it is implicit in his numerous writings and provided a useful standpoint for a review of modern positions such as that of Bertrand Russell and the Existentialists” (p.2).
While there is not enough time to devote to tracing the intellectual journey of Watts from those statements of 1942 it is perhaps helpful to contrast them with some of the views expressed in his magnum opus of 1982, *The Revolution of Ideas*, where with regard to religion he wrote: “Where in all this is the place of religion? I would reply, without hesitation, that its place is not only a central one, but an all-pervasive one, provided it reinterprets the myth of the supernatural as a strong emphasis upon the transcendent in immanence, the eternal in time, and all the implications of such a doctrine: its importance as a 'court of appeal' from notions of a personal God to impersonal, transpersonal standards and principles, enabling us to judge the worthiness or the unworthiness of such a being in the light of Compassion Itself, Kindness Itself, Mercy Itself, etc. Then there is the task of reinterpreting the specifically Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the divine and human natures in Christ, the form of public worship, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the Seven Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Ordination, Marriage, Penitence, and the Anointing of the Sick and Dying. Arising out of reinterpretation is a wide variety of social and psychological questions, which a living religion will take very seriously. Constant in what such a religion will think and do will be the emphasis on the Form of the Good as the supreme quality in the kosmos, with God, however conceived, as the supreme instantiation of the form of the Good throughout the universe. Close and careful study of the world's major religions will be a major activity of Christian transcendentalism (the transcendent or 'leaping across in the immanent'), along with biblical criticism and the critical study of all the world's sacred books” (1982:335-336).

Conclusion

Within the theme of this conference – “Tradition and Traditions” – these three Anglican priests, Capell, Elkin and Watts, form a tradition within the variety of Australian religious traditions. The life experience of these three Anglican priests and scholars covered the late Victorian and Edwardian eras as well as two world wars, the demise of the British Empire and the development of the age of nuclear energy. In terms of Australian history, they lived through the changes which saw Australia move from its Anglo-Saxon and British focus in culture and thinking, into its present quasi-independent and ambiguous role in Asia and the Pacific area. In my view these factors alone make their writings interesting as records of the period
and also within what has been preserved of their theological and religious writings indices of the forces at work in their thinking as well as the policies they espoused and followed.

Of the three, Capell and Elkin maintained a link in their latter years which was one of friendship and continuing scholarly interchange. Watts on the other hand had moved into an area of thinking, teaching and social activity after the war that does not seem to have kept him in touch with Capell whose collected theological writings for The Church Standard he had helped to publish in 1946. Watts had moved on from his parish work and Army education classes of the Second World War to teach for the adult education classes of The University of Sydney and the WEA and the circle of the Sydney Philosophy club which has such strong connections with the teachings and thought of Professor John Anderson. It was within the empiricism of the Andersonian School that Watts continued “to attempt to bring out the empirical content of Christian doctrines” (p.336).

Perhaps one reason for the lack of closer association between Watts and the other two may have been not only that they shared a closer liaison through their daily contact through the Department of Anthropology at The University of Sydney but also the fact that, like his mentor and friend Professor Samuel Angus, Watts suffered by being deprived over time of his church connections, his editorship of The Church Standard and his position as assistant priest at St. James King Street and Christ Church. As his literary executor and old friend H.D.Nicholson has recorded, Watts “felt he was deprived without just cause and denied the opportunity to present his case to the authorities in Sydney. He was too loyal to the Anglican Church to challenge the Church on his own position but he did challenge Church Leaders by letters and a short pamphlet while he was priest at Casino to think out their views of the truth of the creeds.” After 1946 Watts ceased to be a Chaplain to the Forces.

In this preliminary sketch and discussion of the writings of these three Australian priests it is clear that in their own ways they tried to bring to bear modern scientific canons of thinking on theology and religion. Furthermore, they illustrate in an interesting way Professor Mansfield’s observation about the institutional context of Australian religious life and its denominational character. As Anglican priests they also illustrate in an important way attempts from within their denominational institutions to come to grips with the culturally dominant scientific world view as it emerged in religious
thought in the inter-war and post-war years. Capell and Elkin were able to operate comfortably within the traditional ground rules of the Church while Watts was, in a sense, forced out. This is not to say that Watts gave up either his Anglician orders or the integrity of his intellectual position. In this respect he compares interestingly with Elkin. While further analysis of their writings may provide grounds for a different assessment at this stage, it would seem that both with regard to scientific method and world view, Elkin and Watts were ahead of much current theological research and writing and indeed closer in spirit to some of the views expressed more recently by Maurice Wiles and Don Cuppit. Capell on the other hand exhibited a theological openness in his more conservative writings, as the outline of his theology reveals. While his commitment to scientific method in both his professional linguistic research and his theology are evident, his personal piety and loyalty to the Anglo-Catholic tradition seems to have satisfied him in both a religious and intellectual sense. But despite differences the openness which characterise their writings on theology and religion provide a window on an important aspect of the Australian religious tradition.

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