

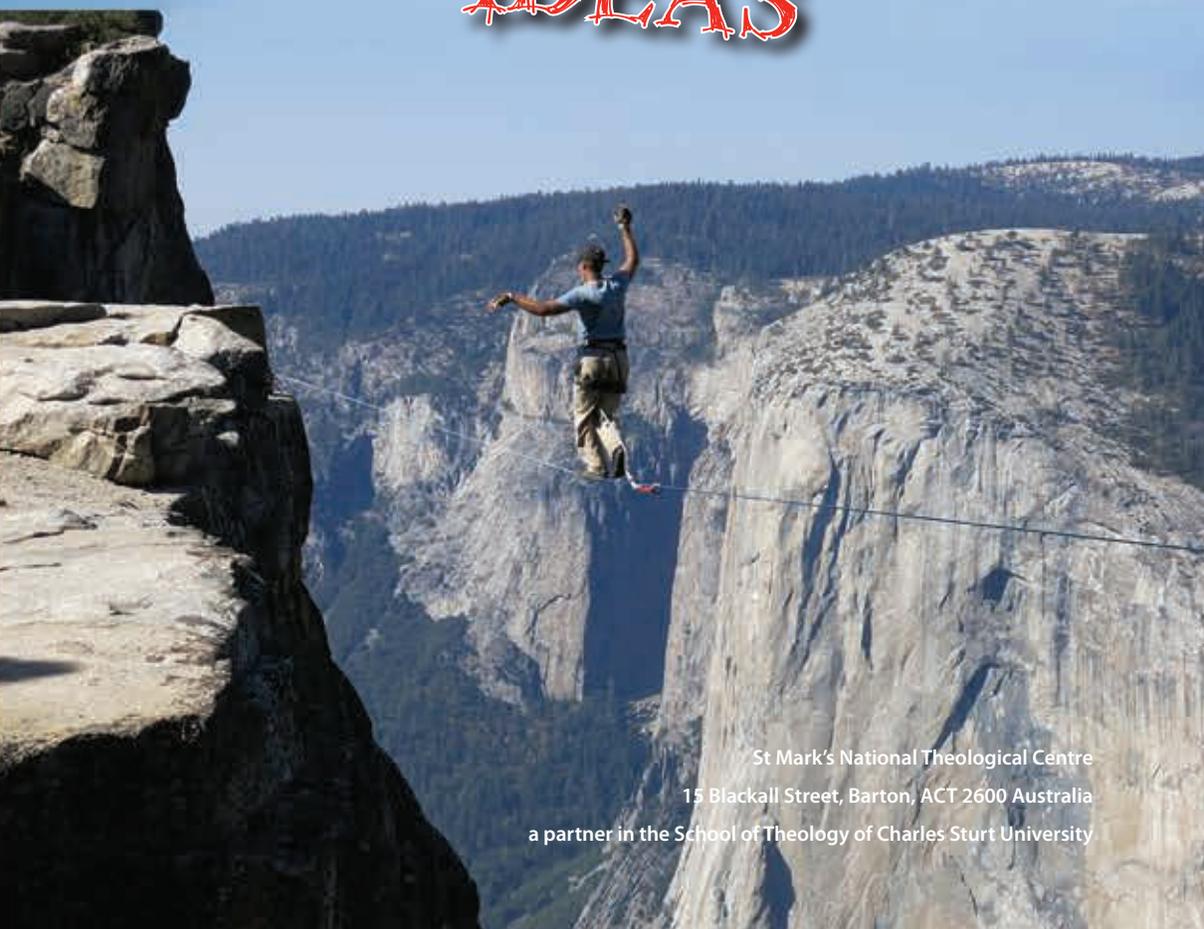


St Mark's Review

A journal of Christian thought & opinion

No. 237, October 2016 (3)

DANGEROUS IDEAS



St Mark's National Theological Centre
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Man highlining at Taft Point in Yosemite National Park with El Capitan in the background.

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Dangerous Ideas

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Editorial

This issue of *St Mark's Review* focuses on 'dangerous ideas'. What constitutes a dangerous idea? One answer is offered by the topics addressed over a number of years at the fashionable 'Festival of Dangerous Ideas' held annually in association with the Sydney Opera House and the Ethics Centre (formerly the St James Ethics Centre) and now also associated with the Melbourne Writers Festival. The range of topics is broad: 'Religion poisons everything', 'Footballers are Barbarians not role models', 'Psychopaths Make the World Go Around', 'Ecstasy is No More Dangerous Than Horse-riding', 'Australia is a third-rate country', 'The Delusion of Free Will', 'All Women Hate Each Other', 'The Devil is Real', 'A Foetus is not a Person' and 'You are Being Greenwashed'. The Melbourne Writer's Festival website makes it clear that a dangerous idea 'can range from the literally dangerous, to those that are difficult to discuss, to those that upset our preconceived ideas and challenge comfortable certainties. It is always worth asking "dangerous to whom?" as this question is an intrinsic part of what makes dangerous ideas worth talking about. And we aren't afraid of letting dangerous ideas get a bit less serious from time to time.' In truth the festival of dangerous ideas might be more aptly described as festival of controversial ideas or, as someone recently said to me, the festival of predictable ideas.

So what makes an idea genuinely dangerous? This issue of *St Mark's Review* takes its cue from an important 2003 article in *American Psychologist* entitled 'Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs That Propel Groups Toward Conflict'. The two authors identified, on the basis of a review of relevant literatures, five belief domains generative of conflict harmful for human society—superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. Each of these areas requires significant unpacking and development, which is precisely

the burden of the article. The discussion of dangerous ideas in that article was the catalyst for the essays that appear in this present edition of *St Mark's Review*. Each author has identified a dangerous idea or a seed of such and developed an argument to show wherein lies the danger, what impacts it has when embodied in practices, and what responses from a position of faith and theology might be appropriate.

The essays cover a range of topics relevant to dangerous ideas: private religion; asylum seekers and refugees; new apocalyptic religious movements; the dark side of zeal for God; Christian ministry, competition and rivalry; loving terrorists; distortions of Christian beliefs. They take a variety of approaches to the theme of dangerous ideas: Bruce Stevens and Heather Thomson show in different ways how deeply held Christian beliefs (Stevens) and virtues (Thomson) are susceptible to manipulation and generate violence; Scott Cowdell brings the insights of René Girard to bear on the dangers inherent in the practice of ministry in a rivalrous and competitive culture; Ros Dalziell and Katherine Rainger address the topic of asylum seekers and refugees, drawing upon historical insights from novels (Dalziell) and contemporary film (Rainger); Bernard Doherty examines the negative influence of contemporary apocalyptic religion; Stephen Pickard considers the dangers inherent in private religion; and Geoff Broughton discusses the controversial imperative of Jesus regarding love of the enemy with special reference to the modern terrorist.

While the topics range over a broad area and the approaches vary, the essayists in different ways all desire to bring the insights of faith and theology to bear on their chosen topics. I would also like to offer special thanks to Heather Thomson for her generous assistance in the preparation of this edition of the journal. What emerges, besides an interesting and provocative series of essays on critical and dangerous themes, is a pattern of Christian engagement which is both illuminating and challenging for discipleship and the life of the Church in today's world. We hope you enjoy this issue of *St Mark's Review*.

Stephen Pickard

Guest Editor

Director

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