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Disability, secularisation, Australian religious culture

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Secularisation, politics, and Australian culture

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Editorial

The first article of this issue of *St Mark's Review* was just going through the press when news broke of the death of Jean Vanier (1928–2019), the Canadian Catholic philosopher, theologian, and humanitarian. Vanier is best known for founding L'Arche, an international federation of communities for people with developmental disabilities. The article, by Jason Greig, is a timely one in light of recent discussions of the extraordinary life and legacy of Vanier. Greig draws on Vanier's insights and practices to consider what it means to follow Jesus in a society and social imaginary that runs at break-neck speed. Greig argues that the western, late-modern embodiment of time has a "destructive logic of speed at its core, which alienates people from one another and leaves others behind as 'wasted lives.'" This is especially the case for those are labelled as having intellectual disabilities because they "embody the very antithesis of the characteristics needed for success in a high-speed society," not least in relation to their experience of time. In this sense, the communities of L'Arche act as powerful witnesses of an authentically Christian experience and conception of time. Drawing on the work and practices of Vanier and L'Arche communities, Greig considers ways in which L'Arche perceives time as a gift for growth and relationship. He further draws on the work of theologian John Swinton to show how L'Arche's experience of time "coheres with a Christian sense of time's source and end." Here God is understood as the "three-mile-an-hour" God: one who entered the world in the incarnation at a time when most people lived and moved at an average walking pace of three miles an hour. By following a "three-mile-an-hour" God, suggests Greig, Christian can enter "God's gentle time, a temporality of fullness and friendship." And it is here that vulnerable bodies are "welcomed not 'problems' but as 'temples of the Holy Spirit.'" One important concrete way in which L'Arche forms persons in this transformed understanding of time and moral imagination is through its regular practice of the rite of footwashing. As Greig shows, this is a practice that requires time and patience—that both exemplifies Jesus' hospitality and forms people "in the Christian task of becoming 'friends of time.'"

Australian philosopher Graeme McLean likewise draws on the reality and experience of people with disabilities—in this case babies born with

a disability—to consider vastly different and opposing contemporary accounts of the value of human life. This in turn allows him to examine "in stark terms some fundamental and central aspects of the broader question of the value of human life." McLean contrasts, on the one hand, a broadly utilitarian vision of human life embodied by English philosopher Jonathan Glover (whose seminars, incidentally, were attended by Peter Singer, an atheist Australian philosopher with similar views). Both Glover and Singer reject a Judeo-Christian worldview, and both contend that it is permissible to kill a baby with a disability. For Glover this rests largely on the grounds of the baby's future suffering and the burden the baby's care would impose on others. In contrast, McLean considers the claims of those who oppose the view that any human life is to be neglected or destroyed, regardless of how able or disabled it might be. Here he considers Mother Teresa's commitments, both in her statements and in her community's extension of care to such babies by embracing them in love and providing homes and support for them. McLean notes, along with others such as Singer, that it was Christianity that introduced the doctrine of sanctity of human life into the world in a Graeco-Roman context where infanticide was common (and sometimes obligatory). McLean argues with some force that a Christian account of the sanctity of human life provides a far more compelling and plausible explanation of our moral intuitions about the value of each individual than that offered by utilitarian thinkers in recent decades and today.

The next two articles grapple with what authentic Christian engagement and witness might look like in an increasingly secularised Australian milieu. Australian theologian Scott Cowdell contends for beliefs and practices—steeped in the authority of Scripture and tradition like tea bags infused in the "boiling water of culture"—that might embody an authentic Christian response to the transformation of Western societies that we now describe in terms of secularisation. In conversation with Roy Williams' recent account of the church's waning influence on Western culture (*Post-God Nation*), Cowdell follows sociologist Peter Berger in rejecting two contemporary responses to secularisation: "deductive" approaches that lock up truth in a literal reading of the Bible or inflexible adherence to church tradition; and "reductive" approaches that underplay Christian doctrines and many long-nurtured disciplines in a bid for relevance to modern conditions of knowledge and moods of aspirational, therapeutic individualism. Instead, Cowdell advocates Berger's "inductive" option, a return by the church to

first principles and faithful attention to Scripture and tradition in mutual dialogue with the prevailing culture. John Moses' article advocates a similar posture of engagement for the church—in this case in relation to Australian political culture. Drawing on some six decades of research and reflection on political history (especially in relation to modern Germany), Moses offers "ten theses on Christianity and political culture in Australia". This is a vision for robust political concern and action, rather than adoption by the church of a "little flock" mentality.

Ian Clark's article opens up fresh perspectives on Australian religious history through a study of the published travel writings of clergy, evangelists, and colporteurs in nineteenth-century Victoria. These writings are of interest, Clark contends, for what they reveal about colonial Australian Christians' attitudes to Indigenous Australian peoples and cultures. In particular, they offer unique perspectives on Aboriginal spirituality and culture that were often of marginal interest to secular researchers. Clark shows that although these writers differed in their assessments of the impact of European invasion and Aboriginal peoples' future prospects, some were affronted by their dispossession and called for compensation and justice; others saw Christianity as a *quid pro quo* for their losses.

Anna Beresford's final article in this issue of *St Mark's Review* broadens our scriptural horizons through a study of the apocryphal Book of Tobit. On the back of a resurgence of scholarly interest in the Apocrypha, Beresford considers literary characteristics of this "amusing and, at times, bizarre tale." More specifically, fable-like representations of animals throw light on the meaning of the book, stressing themes of hospitality and attentiveness to the "other". "God can, and does, communicate to us through his creation," suggests Beresford, "and . . . we need to heed the 'story' that creation is telling us on its own behalf."

In drawing from the whole gamut of theological disciplines—theology, philosophy of religion, church/religious history, and biblical studies—the articles in this issue offer rich resources for critical reflection on a diverse range of contemporary issues. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review.*

Michael Gladwin
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