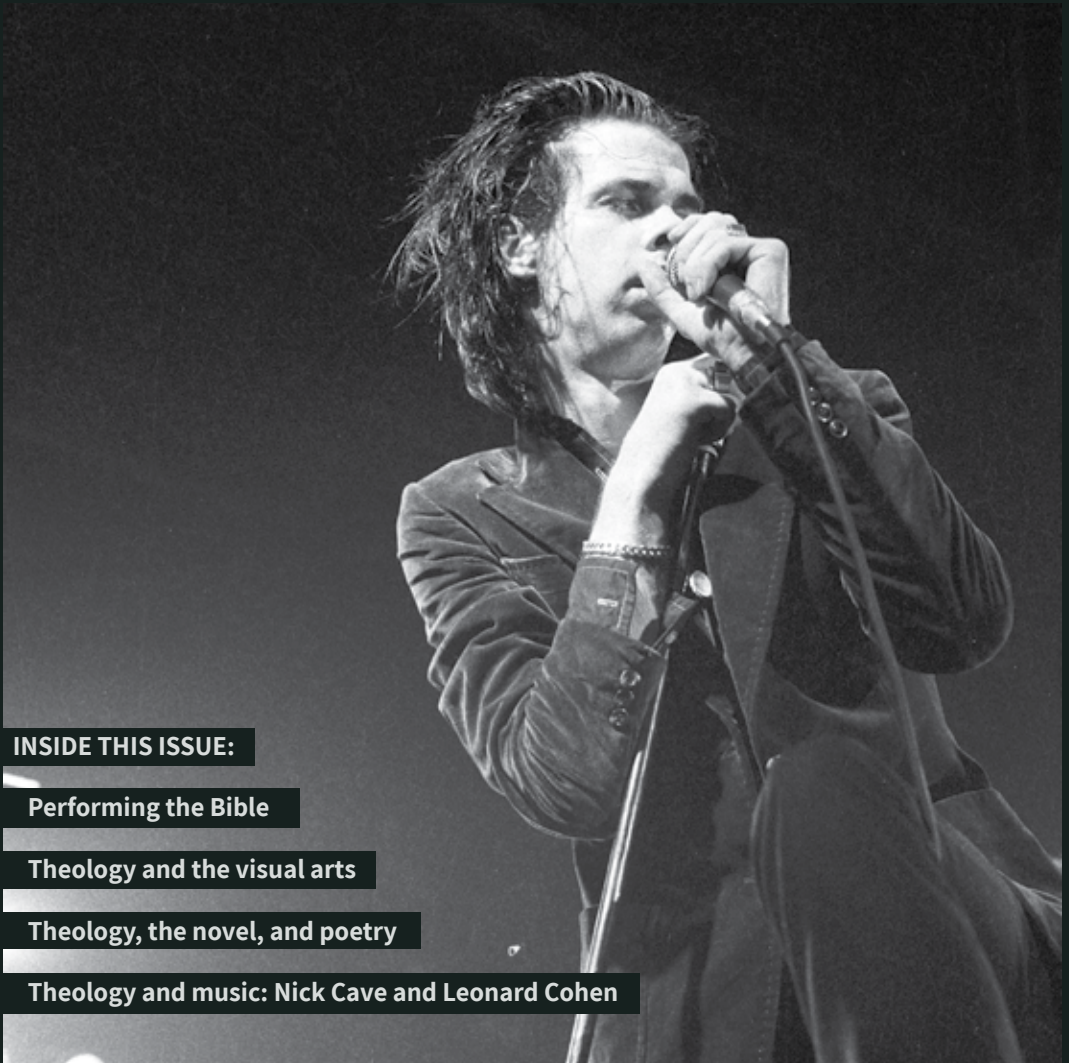




Theology and the arts: Australian perspectives



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Performing the Bible

Theology and the visual arts

Theology, the novel, and poetry

Theology and music: Nick Cave and Leonard Cohen

Editor Dr Michael Gladwin
Reviews editor Dr Bernard Doherty
Editorial committee Chair: Revd Dr Andrew Cameron
Typeset by Graham Lindsay
Artwork by Chevelle Hibberd
Printed by KainosPrint.com.au
PO Box 311, Calwell ACT 2905
Published by St Mark's National Theological Centre
15 Blackall St, Barton ACT 2600

ISSN: 0036-3103

Please address all correspondence to:

The Editor, *St Mark's Review*
15 Blackall Street
BARTON, ACT 2600 Australia
admin@stmarks.edu.au

Subscriptions

For subscriptions and subscription rates, please see back page.

Cover photo: "File:Nick Cave 1986.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Nick_Cave_1986.jpg&oldid=310510464 (accessed October 25, 2019).

Material published in *St Mark's Review* is copyright and may not be reproduced without permission of the Editor. The *Review* is indexed by the *Australian Public Affairs Information Service*, *Religion Index One (USA)* and *Australasian Religion Index*.

St Mark's Review is published quarterly by St Mark's NTC Publishing (an imprint of St Mark's National Theological Centre, Canberra. St Mark's is a partner in the School of Theology of Charles Sturt University. St Mark's incorporates the St Mark's Memorial Library. It shares its site with the Australian Centre for Christianity & Culture.

St Mark's Review

No. 249, September/October 2019 (3)

Theology and the arts: Australian perspectives

Editorial	1
Australian perspectives on theology and the arts	
I. Music and theology	
Erotic theology: conversations with the music, literature, and art of Nick Cave <i>Christopher Turner</i>	5
Leonard Cohen: a priest for the world <i>Ockert Meyer</i>	23
II. Literature and theology	
Faith and doubt in Luke Carman's <i>An Elegant Young Man</i> <i>Lachlan Brown</i>	41
Conversion <i>Margaret Barbalet</i>	55
For all its horror: the demon-haunted literary vision of Flannery O'Connor <i>Bernard Doherty</i>	67
Poetry	90
III. The performing arts, the visual arts, and theology	
Scripture as performance Biblical Performance Criticism—what is it and how do I use it? <i>Jeanette Mathews</i>	93
Blurred theology: on the colour black <i>Peter Kline</i>	115
Book reviews	
Hope and healing for a broken world	128
Was Jezebel really so bad?	131

Editorial

Australian perspectives on theology and the arts

This edition of *St Mark's Review* stands, gazing intently, at the intersection of Christian theology and the arts. The arts have long been recognised as both a springboard and a medium for theological reflection, as well as a catalyst for thoughtful engagement between theology and aesthetics, philosophy, and culture. This is a well-traversed path in overseas scholarship, although somewhat less so in Australia. An Australian context and focus is therefore important here. All contributors live and work in Australia and around half of the articles deal specifically with Australian art and artists, ranging from the epiphanies of a “bogan *flâneur*” in western Sydney to a God-haunted Australian rock star on the world stage.

The following articles offer theological reflection that engages across artistic fields: contemporary music, literature (novels, short stories, and poetry), the performing arts, and the visual arts. The astute reader might notice here the absence of film as an artistic form, for which you are referred to a relatively recent edition of *St Mark's Review* dedicated to the interaction of film, faith, and culture (no. 234, December 2015).

The first set of articles grapples with theological questions raised by the art of contemporary popular musicians and writers. Chris Turner begins with a plea to theologians to resist the temptation to search within Australian art merely for the easily accessible themes of love and redemption—a kind of low-hanging fruit—and to look beyond to art that is marked more by “liminality and ambiguity.” For Turner this is nowhere better exemplified than in the work of Australian-born rock musician and writer Nick Cave. Turner contends that the visceral, elemental and erotic intensity of Cave's music and writings—and indeed his own ways of being in the world—lay bare dark and complex “home truths” about human drives and desires, as

well as what it means to be “an Australian person.” Turner notes Cave’s later explorations of love as an “irrational reaction to the banality of existence”—a kind of “erotic theology”—and adds that there is value of engaging in critical but genuine conversation with such an ostensibly atheological vision. There is an invitation to theology, suggests Turner, to consider that “spiritual meaning, for Cave and the many people who respond to his art, resides not in transcendence but in descent; descent into ambiguity, carnality, and incredulity.” Cave’s artistic vision can help us to realise afresh that reason, “and particularly the rational element in reason, though necessary, is not sufficient in the dynamics of faith.” This serves to foreground the importance of Christian mystical and theological traditions that recognize, along with twentieth-century thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Rudolph Otto, and Albert Schweitzer, an epistemology and physical felt sense of the transcendent—a “pre-rational, organic felt sense that determines human interest in the inter-subjective relationship with reality as it is.” In a similar way, Ockert Meyer helps us to engage with the work of Leonard Cohen, another contemporary musician and writer whose artistic and theological aspirations, grounded as they were in his Judaism, make him an illuminating conversation partner for theology. Meyer contends that although Cohen was a man of fiery and often seemingly contradictory passions (which included well-documented explorations of Hinduism, Scientology, and Buddhism), it is this Jewish self-understanding (including a notion of a kind of “priestly” vocation) that offers a hermeneutical prism through which his entire oeuvre may be fruitfully read and interpreted.

The second set of articles offers a range of reflections on literature and theology. Lachlan Brown reads Luke Carman’s recent prize-winning Australian novel/memoir, *An Elegant Young Man*, in theological terms as a series of Dantean spiralling descents and a kind of prophetic wandering. Brown notes how the novel’s protagonist, a kind of “bogan *flâneur*”, experiences a series of “anti-epiphanies” to create a dialectic of sacred and profane, and ironic scepticism alongside “profound moments of (a)spirituality”. In doing so, contends Brown, the novel presents “new kinds of transcendence”, while at the same time demonstrating the “limited and limiting visions” of contemporary Sydney’s southwestern suburbs. This seem to suggest, as Carman puts it, that “Australia is not the place for ecstatic truth.” In stark contrast to Carman’s scepticism, Australian novelist, poet, and essayist Margaret Barbalet provides a moving personal account of her journey to

embracing Christian faith. In doing so, she also provides a fascinating glimpse into how an Australian writer's vocation has interacted with what Evelyn Waugh (a literary convert of a different era) described as the 'twitch on the thread' of divine grace (a phrase Waugh had in turn borrowed from G. K. Chesterton). In the final article in this section, Bernard Doherty shifts our attention to the "Christ-Haunted" American South of Catholic novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor. Doherty draws on O'Connor's fiction and non-fiction to consider how she both understood and portrayed—often in grotesque and violent terms—what theology has traditionally called the *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of evil) or the role of personified evil in the drama of redemption. For "a contemporary Christian world that has in part said 'farewell to the Devil,'" argues Doherty:

and a secular culture that continues to hold a perverse fascination with a caricatured supernatural Devil (but fails to appreciate the more banal manifestations of personal evil which are witnessed in the everyday) O'Connor's fiction takes evil seriously. However, she does it in a way that is neither transparently catechetical nor piously imbued with a credulity toward demonic "signs and wonders" which marked much Catholic literature of her time.

O'Connor's oeuvre, Doherty adds, is one that bears powerful literary witness to the reality of radical personal evil. It is also a witness that forcefully critiques any attempts to perfect nature with grace (not least insipid forms of liberal Protestant, cultural Christianity) and bears eloquent testimony to the costliness of human redemption and the depth of God's love. This literary-themed section is rounded out by three original new poems on religious themes from two Australian poets, John Foulcher and Lachlan Brown.

The final section explores the interaction of theology and biblical scholarship with the performing and visual arts. Old Testament scholar Jeanette Mathews shows how the emerging field of Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) has brought the discipline of biblical studies into dialogue (literally!) with Performance Studies (which is itself an interdisciplinary field that includes theatre studies, cultural anthropology, linguistics, sociology, social psychology, ethnomusicology, literary theory, and legal studies, among others). As Mathews points out,

Scripture *is* performed communication: between God and humanity, between faithful scribes and their readers, between communities of faith and subsequent generations for whom and to whom they preserve and pass on their traditions and convictions. Moreover, Scripture aims to transform its addressees, enabling them to embody the script and re-enact it in their own settings.

Through analysis of a number of well-known Old Testament episodes, Mathews shows us how BPC can help modern audiences to recognise aspects of oral and dramatic engagement with ancient audiences. This in turn throws new light on ancient texts and traditions, allowing them to surprise and challenge us in new ways. In the final article in this issue, Peter Kline offers a series of exploratory reflections on the visual arts and theological aesthetics, in this case in relation to the work of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. Kline argues for the value of reframing our thinking about blackness and black as a colour, noting that although within Christian thought blackness has had theologically freighted associations with death, evil, sin, impurity, and ignorance, it has also possessed what might be described as a “counter-optics” in which mystical and apophatic expressions of Christianity have affirmed a vision of God within darkness or blackness. Such counter-optics, contends Kline, offer rich resources for critiquing and challenging the “violent optics of modernity”, especially those that have linked pejorative connotations of black and blackness to accounts of racial difference.

The following articles remind us of the cultural and theological importance of the arts and the value of thoughtful Christian engagement with them, not least from Australian vantage points. The conversation is a mutually enriching one that can offer new theological insights as well as a richer understanding of own cultural context—a kind of cultural exegesis. While these articles offer a compelling rationale for theological engagement with a rich variety range of artistic expression and visions, they also offer models of what that kind of critical engagement can look like. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Michael Gladwin