



## Emerging scholars in Australian theology



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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

This issue of *St Mark's Review* introduces new voices in Australian theology. The focus is on the work of emerging scholars, in the sense that all contributors are Australian theology graduates or students, most of whom have submitted PhDs within the last two years. They therefore represent a new generation of theological scholarship. Their articles are diverse in their focus and in their choice of themes, subject matter and disciplinary/interdisciplinary locations. And they deal with issues that are at once pressing and perennial. Several articles work within the fields of systematic and practical theology, while others stand at the intersections of theology and film, theology and literature, and biblical studies and social research. Here it is worth noting that five of the seven articles have been contributed by students or graduates (four at doctoral level and one at masters) of St Mark's National Theological Centre in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University. St Mark's has one of the largest postgraduate theology communities in Australia, so these articles represent a small sample of the variety and vibrancy of theological reflection within the college.

Danielle Treweek's opening article highlights the many ways in which contemporary Christian discourse has portrayed the single life as abnormal and somehow deficient, relegating the single Christian to the position of "abject other" and impeding his or her efforts to construct "a positive personal and social identity for themselves within the believing community." Instead, Treweek contends, by recovering an eschatological anticipation of a new creation in which there is no human marriage, "the individual who has forgone marriage, sex, and procreation in this age" is in a position to uniquely witness to the church's constitution as a community where the life of one who is unmarried (whether by choice or by circumstance) ought "not be characterised as problem, but celebrated as privilege."

In contrast, Chris Swann's subsequent article is a reminder of the challenges and complexities of the married state, notably in the notoriously tangled intimate relationships of one of the twentieth century's greatest theologians, Karl Barth. Swann shows how in Barth's theological project the centrality of Christ and the autonomy of Christian theology constituted a call for radical discipleship, one that he lived out in his defiance of Nazi

authority and in his later theological and political stances. One of the most powerful early expressions of that call, the *Barmen Declaration*, was crafted by Barth in a Frankfurt hotel room in 1934. But it was another bedroom, the single room at Princeton Theological Seminary shared by the married Barth and his secretary Charlotte von Kirschbaum on his 1962 American tour, that has cast a long shadow over Barth's vision of discipleship. Swann explores, in the light of this "tale of two bedrooms," the promise of Barth's vision of discipleship grounded in the "liberating achievement of God in Christ," as well as the problems posed by imperfect and "all-too-human" responses to it (whether Barth's or ours).

The next two articles bring theology into conversation with the arts. Katherine Rainger does so through theological reflection on contemporary Australian film and filmmakers. She draws in particular on the postcolonial theology of Willie Jennings, which has identified ways in which various agents of colonialism—represented by the merchant, the soldier, and the missionary—and their modes of relating and belonging have transformed the spaces they colonise, as well as their relations with "the Indigenous other." Instead of these often "disfigured" modes of relating, Jennings advocates new ways of witness marked more by belonging and connection. In this vein, Rainger sees in the extraordinary filmmaking collaboration of Yolngu actor David Gulpilil and non-Indigenous film director Rolf de Heer a model of this new way of relating and becoming. She describes this as "the way of the filmmakers." Gulpilil and de Heer's motivations and experiences, argues Rainger,

along with their collaborative partnership reflect Jennings' desire for joining through "spaces of communion" that acknowledge the significance of history, place, belonging, intimacy, connection, and a willingness to be changed by an encounter with another. The way of the collaborative filmmaker embodies a particular mode of belonging that is malleable in both geographical and historical contexts and is attentive to the other. In this way de Heer and Gulpilil become a model for Christian relationality where joining, intimacy, reciprocal hospitality, and belonging are integral parts of communal and individual discipleship.

Elise Silson also pursues a conversation between the arts and theology, in this case with a literary giant, the nineteenth-century English novelist

George Eliot. Eliot's religious beliefs have long been a source of speculation, partly due to her "reticence to articulate those beliefs" directly in her published work or in her private correspondence. Those beliefs are also of interest due to Eliot's literary stature and influence, but for this editor with an interest in historical theology they are of further importance because of Eliot's role as a translator of seminal nineteenth-century German thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and David Strauss. Silson draws on her study of the intertextual relationships at play in the theological consciousness that permeates Eliot's masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. By studying the texts that surround and connect to the novel, as well as key characters' epistemologies and theologies, Silson shows how Eliot "guides readers in their own faith approaches, leading them to evaluate the lived social impact of their relationship with the divine good, both within themselves and in each other." In doing so, Silson sheds valuable new light on Eliot's philosophical and theological visions.

Erin Martine Sessions offers perspectives from her work in Old Testament studies, in particular her interdisciplinary research into the Song of Songs and its relevance to the primary prevention of gender-based violence. Using a similar interdisciplinary method, Sessions' article is a "poetic parsing" of the Song's linguistic and literacy devices, and how these portray the sexuality and the bodies of the lovers. In turn, contends Sessions, this portrayal offers a powerful corrective to contemporary beliefs about women's bodies and attitudes towards female sexuality.

The final two articles deal bring Christological discussions to bear on issues of discipleship and Christian contributions to the common good. Aden Cotterill offers a fresh assessment of the Christology of Latin American liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino. Cotterill draws out the many contributions and challenges of Sobrino's Christology. These include Sobrino's emphasis on *praxis* (an integration of theology and discipleship); careful attentiveness to context and the need for continual "contextual reformulation"; a stress on the crucifixion and resurrection, and their implications for the "victims of history" and the "scandalous revelation of the transcendent God"; and, finally, Sobrino's emphasis on the kingdom of God, which is illuminated by ways in which the poor "bring suspicions, questions, and illuminations that make the texts about Jesus Christ give up more of themselves." There is a challenge here to consider the viewpoints of the poor, the victim, and those outside the Global North; and, if we are to take to heart Søren Kierkegaard's

call to passionate subjectivity rather than abstract detachment, to ground theological reflection in prayer and personal relationship.

In the final article of this issue of *St Mark's Review*, Miriam Bruning offers a timely reflection—not least amid a pandemic lockdown and social distancing—on ways in which a robust concept of “the common good” can help Christian communities in their efforts to serve Australian society. Drawing on her doctoral study of how reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ leads people to support the common good, Bruning contends that the common good is:

community formed by the best relationships. Such a community not only looks after its members, but their individual and collective behaviour engages with and serves the wider society. Such behaviour works for more social cohesion and less dissociation. Christian communities have not dropped out of a society that continues cohesively. Rather, they can see themselves within a society where, like the expanding universe, the coherent centres are losing contact with one another.

This does not mean, adds Bruning, that Christian communities need to “seek to recreate or reclaim Christendom;” nor does it need that they see their sole aim as “to restore civic society; and nor yet does it need that “they only view the common good as a vehicle for more effective evangelism. In this society, Christian communities are clay jars that are full of the treasure of the common good, providing they constantly give this treasure away.”

The following articles are testament to the richness and variety of theological work that is being done by an emerging generation of Australian theologians. They offer new theological insights and voices, and, in several cases, a deeper understanding of own Australian context and how we might engage faithfully and thoughtfully within it. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

**Michael Gladwin**  
Editor