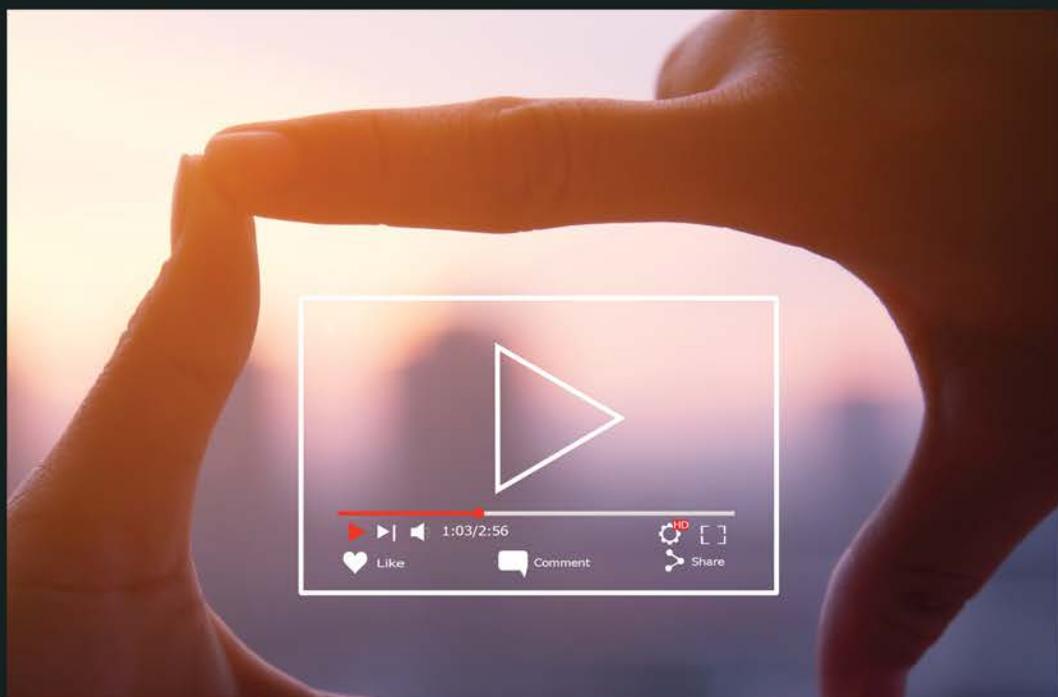




Screening the sacred: theology and television



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Editorial

This special issue of *St Mark's Review* takes its cue from the groundbreaking work of Kutter Callaway, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, and screenwriter Dean Batali—specifically their 2016 book, *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue*.¹ In the introduction to that book, Callaway and Batali offer a compelling case for why theologically informed and critical engagement with television is essential in our contemporary culture. In the first place, they observed the rise since the late 1990s of a “golden age” of high-quality television content that has realised the artistic possibilities of the kind of “long-form, episodic storytelling” that is just not possible within the far more circumscribed time limits of a feature film. They also note that despite the secularising nature of cultural contexts, a great deal of television content is “brimming with enchantment” and “concerned with the mysterious, the fantastic, the unexplained, the undead, and even the religious”. A related observation concerns the “mythic shape” and narratively constructed nature of culture, which means that the ascendancy of television has made it the “dominant story-telling medium” of early-twenty-first-century western culture. And finally, they point out that recent technological change has radically changed the ways we choose and consume television, especially with the advent of smartphones and on-demand, mobile, and streaming services.² In the Australian context these changes have only been magnified by pandemic lockdowns and the rapidly expanding reach of Netflix and a host of streaming services on our screens.

In light of these realities, in which television both reflects culture and is culture creating, there is a profound need for religious communities to develop skills, critical methods, and interpretative frameworks to engage television with thoughtfulness, discernment, and wisdom. That need is the rationale for the articles in this special number of *St Mark's Review*, each of which takes Callaway and Batali's insights as their starting point.

For the first two articles we are fortunate to have contributions from two of the world's leading scholars on theological engagement with television and film. The first is offered by Callaway himself, helpfully weaving together an overview of the articles in this number with an incisive update on the trajectory of trends identified in his earlier book. The result is a re-articulation of “how to watch TV religiously”—namely, what critical yet faithful engagement with television might look like in a cultural landscape marked by “equal parts existential angst

and renewed spiritual interest” and the “gravitational pull” of American cultural production; the rise of ‘fake news’ and television content as propaganda (only some of which counts as art); a deeply polarised, post-Trump political landscape; and a global pandemic.

Craig Detweiler, a filmmaker and dean of Grand Canyon University’s College of Performing Arts and Production, models critical yet generous theological engagement with contemporary television and its thematic concerns. His article is an incisive analysis of *The Americans*, a spy drama that explores the deceptions we practice on the job, and especially in our homes—but, at a more fundamental level, reveals the pervasiveness of spiritual longing and the spiritual cost of deceit. In this sense it is a ‘cautionary tale about identity and fidelity, using the lapse of time as a distancing device to tell ourselves a troubling story about ourselves.’

Megan Powell du Toit argues that ‘[h]ow Evangelicals engage over cultural texts such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* matters not just for the church but for society.’ Her article considers public theological engagement with the stories of our culture—especially those told through television, such as *Handmaid’s Tale*—through the relatively new digital medium of podcasting. The podcasting format, she suggests, centring on ‘two Evangelical voices who own to some differences with each other’, can provide a model of more considered and reflective engagement with cultural texts, not least those that have significant traction in popular culture.

Bernard Doherty notes how for many the long-form television series has replaced the novel as a key leisure-time activity. His article brings the theological and artistic insights of twentieth-century American novelist Flannery O’Connor into conversation with the award-winning HBO crime drama, *True Detective*. *True Detective*, he argues, may be viewed as a small screen evocation of O’Connor’s profound theological reflection on sin and redemption in a Christ-haunted contemporary American South.

It matters greatly, contends Justine Toh, what stories we live by—and consume—on the screen. Consequently, her article explores how the values, attitudes, and beliefs we encounter in *Hamilton: An American Musical* and *Ted Lasso* depict—but, more critically, resist—a dominant cultural story lived by many in the contemporary West. Instead of the ‘meritocratic story’ of life which holds that ‘we earn, through our effort and hard work, whatever success comes our way’, *Hamilton* and *Ted Lasso* offers opportunities for people to engage with Christian ideas of grace that are far more forgiving. A gospel of grace, Toh concludes, ‘has much to offer a cultural story that puts success—and, ultimately, salvation—down to individual effort.’

The title of this journal edition has, of course, a double aspect. On the one hand, thoughtless and uncritical binge-watching might well distract us and screen the sacred from our senses. But thoughtful and discerning engagement with television, and the stories our culture tells itself through this medium, can be a means of encountering the sacred—and goodness, beauty, and truth—through our screens. The conversation can be a mutually enriching one that offers new theological insights as well as a richer understanding of own cultural context—a kind of cultural exegesis. While the following articles offer a compelling rationale for theological engagement with the stories that screen the sacred, they also offer models of what that kind of critical engagement might look like. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Michael Gladwin
October 2021

Endnotes

- 1 Kutter Callaway and Dean Batali, *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016).
- 2 Callaway and Batali, *Watching TV Religiously*, 3–11.