

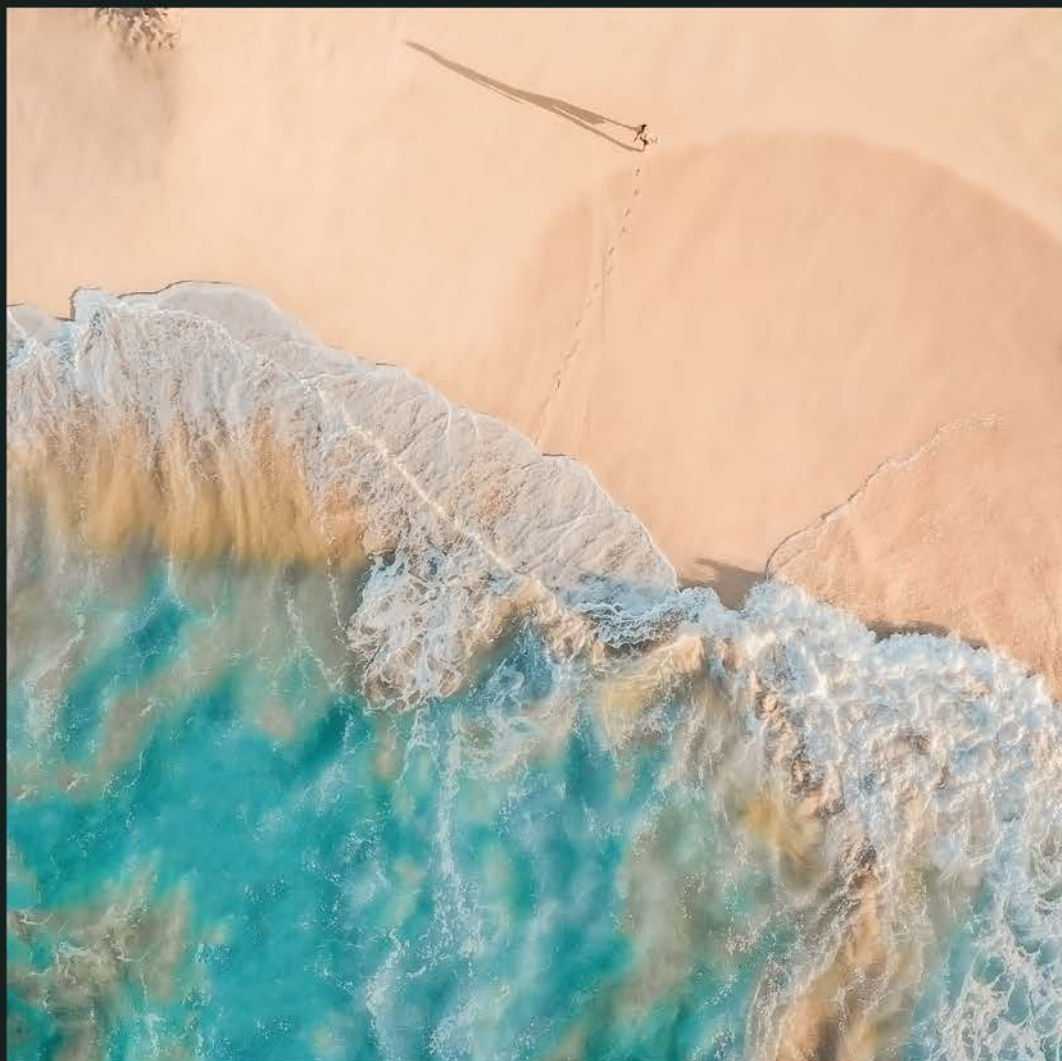
# ST MARK'S REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT & OPINION



**St Mark's**  
NATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTRE

## Sensing the sacred: Australian perspectives



**Editor** Dr Michael Gladwin  
**Editorial committee** Chair: Rev. Professor Andrew Cameron  
**Typeset by** Graham Lindsay  
**Artwork by** Dr Michael Gladwin, Graham Lindsay  
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Please address all correspondence to:

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

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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

The theme of this number of *St Mark's Review* takes its cue from the long western Christian tradition of theological and philosophical reflection on the “spiritual senses” and how we perceive God. As far back as the third century, Origen’s discussion of the spiritual senses employed language that moved between analogy and metaphor, initiating a conversation spanning millennia: from the church fathers Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor; to medieval mystics and theologians such as Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Julian of Norwich, and Nicholas of Cusa; to modern theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Sarah Coakley. Over the last fifty years, contemporary philosophers of religion such as John Hick, Richard Swinburne, Caroline Franks Davis, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Paul Moser have made further important contributions to our understanding of religious perception.

One of the landmark modern surveys of this long conversation about the spiritual senses is Sarah Coakley and Paul Gavrilyuk’s edited collection, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). In this work Coakley and Gavrilyuk propose a distinction between a vocabulary that describes “ordinary mental acts such as imagination, reflection or understanding” and one that refers to “a special mode of perception” where God becomes the object of the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell. It is this special mode of perception, how we “sense the sacred”, that is the focus of this number of *St Mark's Review*. Our more specific focus, however, is on what Australian theologians, philosophers and indeed our Australian context itself, might contribute to this long and important conversation.

To that end, the following articles range across Christian traditions and disciplinary boundaries—from theology to philosophy to spirituality—and address a number of aspects of this broader theme. Jane Foulcher’s article contrasts European perceptions of the sacred and the divine in the writings of Australia’s first Anglican priest, the Rev. Richard Johnson, and one of Australia’s greatest contemporary poets, Les Murray. Foulcher finds that perceiving God in this place is at once “astonishingly rare” and yet “surprisingly ordinary.”

Philosopher Ryan Young argues for a posture of humility about knowledge, not least because of the profound limits of the propositional knowledge on which we still tend to place so much value. Those limits mean there is a wide

open field in philosophical discourse for the kinds of knowledge discussed by theologians and mystics.

The theme of humility—in this case its fundamental importance for personal encounter with God—also pervades Robin Wrigley-Carr's rich study of the recorded visions of the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, reformer, and Carmelite nun, Teresa of Avila.

Duncan Reid's essay shows how Indigenous Australian ways of knowing might raise important questions for Australian theologians. In the first place, he asks, how can non-Indigenous Australians, coming as we do out of an essentially reductionist worldview, respond to the "non-ordinary" elements in traditional Aboriginal story-telling that call into question all that we customarily accept as rational and scientific? Second, how can we approach the traditional claim that land (space, and therefore also time) is permeated by numinous presence, perhaps the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Nikolai Blaskow examines a sense of the sacred in the writings of atheist thinkers, in this case Friedrich Nietzsche. The result is a provocative meditation on transcendent experience in ostensibly unlikely places.

Finally, John Harris's review article reflects on an important new book that charts, through documentary sources, the life and mixed legacies of the Church Missionary Society mission in Oenpelli, Arnhem Land.

The chief end of humankind is, as the Westminster Confession put it, to glorify God *and enjoy Him forever*. It is our hope that the following articles might offer new resources for sensing the sacred and pursuing that end. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Dr Michael Gladwin  
Editor, *St Mark's Review*