

Introduction to the Special Issue: Dialogues of Secular and Sacred: Christianity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Australian Culture

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We are writing as the Christian season of Lent approaches. In Australia summer stretches out; often the land is bleached dry, ripe for bushfire in the south, cyclones up north. Since February 1983 when fires engulfed south-eastern states, the term ‘Ash Wednesday’ has connoted smoke and ash and devastation for most Australians, over-shadowing the liturgical calendar. This year though, there’s more. To mark the stunning victory of

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local tennis champion Ash Barty at the Australian Open in late January, witty religious cognoscenti reported a campaign on social media to reclaim the first day of Lent in her honour: 'Ash Wednesday' (McGirr 2022). It's a gentle, self-deprecating in-joke, fully conscious of the layers of Australian popular culture that outweigh the religious festival.

The joke is possible though because of the porous relationship between secular and sacred in the cultural imagination of Australia. This permeable boundary between faith and the wider culture is the focus of this special issue.

Until the 1980s, narratives of Australia seemed adamant that this 'most godless place under heaven' had little to offer scholars of religion. The assumption was that the colonial nation forged in the wake of the industrial expansion and European revolution did not accommodate a mythic heritage, neither in recognizing the spiritual sovereignty of the First Nations peoples, nor in the belief systems that came with the British. However, over the last several decades, more nuanced post-secular readings of Australia (and Australian history in particular) have shown the impact of 'visionary and spiritual' as well as religious impulses in public and private lives (Bellanta 2010).

Meanwhile, academic theology in Australia since the mid-1960s had been encouraged to read the secular 'signs of the times' and embrace their implications for the sacred. Edited volumes sought distinctively Australian inflections in the dialogue between classical Christian doctrines (Hayes 1979; Malone 1988; Malone 1999). But sequestered from robust interdisciplinary conversation in the universities and mistrusted in the churches as potentially colonial or syncretistic, contextual theology remained at the margins. It is now 34 years since Ngangikurungkurr elder and theologian Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann first wrote about 'dadirri' in English and 36 years since Gerald O'Collins published *Jesus Today: Christology in an Australian Context* (Ungunmerr-Baumann 1988; O'Collins 1986). Integrating cultural and contextual perspectives on the Christ-figure with theological understanding remains rare.

This special issue aims to enable fresh articulation of the meaning and recalibration of the Christ-figure in Australia. It emerged from a 2021 symposium at Pilgrim Theological College on 'Jesus in [1950s] Australia'. In a decade when institutional religion boomed, these articles contest any bland conformity as well as the dichotomies of secular and sacred. We are grateful to the University of Divinity for a research grant to support the project, to the anonymous reviewers of articles, and to the authors. Work remains to build a collaborative matrix of disciplinary approaches anchored to both cultural artefacts and Christian understanding of Incarnation (both broadly understood). We invite you to read on.

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