The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

ENGAGE

June 2026 Issue 21

About Engage

Engage is published by the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University. Articles and images without attribution have been created by Centre staff.

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ISSN 2652-4333

www.csu.edu.au/accc

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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Great Cross during cool grassland burn

Cover photo, St Mark's Grassland cool burn, photo volunteer Muhammad Fahri

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Centre and Yindyamarra team with Bishop Mark Short

Welcome to our new Executive Director

Centre Celebration, Commissioning and Book Launch

On 8 May 2026 the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture Chapel hosted a celebration of the Centre's renewal including the commissioning of Professor Peter Sherlock as Executive Director. The event reflected the Centre's longstanding commitment to the arts: the Chapel was visually transformed by artworks in the Beyond exhibition curated by Centre adjunct researcher, Dr Toni Hassan, while Centre partners A Chorus of Women began the formalities with a song.

Lin Hatfield Dodds, Chair of the Centre's Board, acknowledged Country and welcomed around 70 people to the event, including the Hon David Smith, MP for Bean. Dr Jonathan Cole, the Centre's Associate Director, Research, then read Proverbs 8:1-12, a passage reflecting on the theme of wisdom. The gathering was addressed by Professor Ruth Powell and by Professor Peter Sherlock; whose remarks are printed below.

Dr Mark Short, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn and Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, formally commissioned Professor Sherlock as Executive. He then welcomed and commissioned Professor Ruth Powell, newly appointed as a part-time Professor at the Centre in conjunction with her ongoing role as Director of NCLS Research. Joined on stage by the other staff of both the Centre and Yindyamarra Nguluway, Bishop Mark prayed for the team and their work and ministry.

After the commissioning, Distinguished Professor Stan Grant Jr launched Professor Sherlock's new book *The Monuments of Westminster Abbey: Power and Memory in Early Modern Britain* (Routledge, 2025). Professor Grant began by reflecting on what an Aboriginal man might make of a book about monuments to British men and women on the other side of the world, before pointing to the centrality of death and memory to all human societies. He highlighted how, in amidst the details of individual monuments and the colourful stories of their creation, the book told a story of the loss of the sacred and its replacement with political power across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and drew attention to the challenging legacies this profound cultural shift has left to our own times.

The formalities closed with another song from A Chorus of Women, followed by refreshments and the chance to purchase copies of Professor Sherlock's books and have them signed.

Board member Brendan Smyth and Associate Director Jonathan Cole with Peter Sherlock's books

Introducing Peter Sherlock: History, Theology, Music

Centre Executive Director Peter Sherlock with his book outside St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne

Professor Peter Sherlock formally commenced in the combined role of Executive Director of the Centre, together with Yindyamarra Nguluway, at Charles Sturt University on 1 May 2026. We asked him to introduce himself and his new role to us, and we hope you enjoy getting to know him as much as we are.

Peter, your new role stretches across two entities at Charles Sturt University. Can you explain the combined role, and what synergies or tensions do you see between them?

I first joined Charles Sturt in January 2025 as Associate Director of Yindyamarra Nguluway, supporting Distinguished Professor Stan Grant Jr. The Wiradjuri word *yindyamarra* can be translated into English as "respect" though it is so much more than that – just read any of Stan's recent books to find out more! *Yindyamarra winhanangha* is the ethos adopted by Charles Sturt University, embodying the idea of wisdom that shapes a world worth living in. And *nguluway* means coming together or meeting. So Yindyamarra Nguluway is the meeting place where we seek to change our world for the better, through practices such as respect, listening, grace, going slowly.

"Wisdom for the common good is very close in spirit to yindyamarra: there is significant alignment of purpose."

For me, Yindyamarra Nguluway is all about better relationships; in a world of growing division and isolation, how can we reach out to one another and see over the barriers we erect, to find better ways to live together? To deliver that requires research, writing, and public engagement – the generation and dissemination of these ideas – and it's a privilege to work with Stan, our colleague Professor Dominic O'Sullivan, and a growing group of supporters to communicate these ideas and practices to staff and students at Charles Sturt and in the broader Australian community.

So when I was invited to take on the role of Executive Director of the Centre in an acting capacity from August 2025, I saw many resonances. Wisdom for the common good is very close in spirit to *yindyamarra*: there is significant alignment of purpose.

Both units at Charles Sturt are attempting to do very big things with slim resources, and I saw a great opportunity to do more together in delivering research, public events, media engagement, and communications.

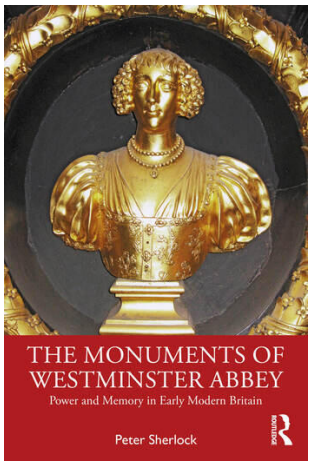
They do, however, have different partners and distinct audiences. Yindyamarra Nguluway has a remit beyond Christianity or religion into many other parts of the university and the nation. The Centre has a second owner, the Anglican Diocese, and supports the needs of the church as well as the University.

So going forward, the opportunity is to work out how to continue to build a team that can support great outcomes for both Yindyamarra and the Centre, while the challenge is to address overlapping but distinct audiences and needs.

You've worked for many years in roles associated with both church and academy, and with an increasing priority on First Nations' needs. What are some of the learnings you bring from this experience to your new role?

I was privileged to spend 16 years at the University of Divinity – 4 years at the United Faculty of Theology in Parkville, and then 12 years as Foundation Vice-Chancellor. It was good preparation for this role as I navigated the overlapping but distinct needs of a university and its church partners (some 40 different organisations!). The main thing I learned was to listen, learn, and celebrate the wisdom and grace of diverse people I met, especially students.

I inherited a passion for reconciliation and justice from my high school days; two of my three papers for Year 12 history were on Aboriginal history. At Divinity we put Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theologies as the highest priority in our strategic plan for around 10 years, and – like any good partnership – it took us all of that time to consult and listen and take a few risks as we worked with First Nations communities on what we should do and how to resource that. I took away from those many conversations an appreciation for how whitefellas could do things differently and much joy at being invited into new ways (for me) of encountering God and Country.



Your new book is on the monuments of Westminster Abbey, and you also launched your book Theology Matters at the Centre in 2025. What are you researching and writing about now?

My academic training was in history – I had the great fortune to undertake my doctorate in early modern British history at Oxford – and I began writing about theology as a way of reflecting on my work. History remains my first love; I used to joke that most theologians are actually historians, working on ancient biblical texts or the development of doctrine over time.

I am currently beginning two new projects. One relates to Yindyamarra Nguluway, that I broadly call "family history as truth telling". What would it look like to address some of our national debates about identity and belonging, by taking up the hobby of family history and inviting people to investigate and perhaps reimagine the stories of who they are and how they came to be where they are? What would happen if we brought communities together to share those stories – could we break down some of our divisions and learn from each other's experiences? So, I am writing a book about my immigrant ancestor Thomas Winder who settled in the Hunter Valley in the 1820s, and asking, where did he belong?

The second project integrates with the Centre's work, and is a short book about the future of Christianity in Australia. When I'm feeling despondent I call it Dead Church – I want to investigate the demographic and cultural decline of mainstream Christianity over the past half a century, and how churches are responding to that, both at the denominational and local levels. This is a challenging project, as I want to help Christians face up to the reality of our times, and to discern what God might be saying to us about the way ahead. It's also an exciting one as I begin to hear stories of extraordinary things often quite small groups of people are doing to live out and share the gospel.

Finally, what do you do outside the world of work? Tell us about some of your passions, and perhaps one unusual thing our readers should know about you …

I am a lifelong Anglican and have several voluntary roles with the church, including as a member of the national General Synod which is meeting in August this year. It's a great challenge to bring my professional expertise in history, theology, and governance into dialogue with my Christian faith and to try to support the church's leaders in navigating these times with courage and joy.

My hobbies include bushwalking and wine, so I am looking forward to exploring the Canberra region. My favourite track is the Cape to Cape in Margaret River on Wadandi country in Western Australia – beaches, cliffs, forests, flowers, streams – it has it all, and you can fit in a wine-tasting at the end of a hard day's walk.

Music is a vital part of my life, and I was delighted to discover a beautiful piano in the Centre's Chapel. I sing with the choir of St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, when I'm in town, with as many as six services a week in term time. It's a wonderful way to bring mind, body, and spirit together with an incredible group of musicians.

One thing you should know about me? I don't drive, and have never had a driver's licence. To be honest I just never found the time to learn, and having got this far in life, it seems I may not need to do so! I am delighted to say Canberra public transport and walking paths are working just fine for me.

Centre Executive Director Professor Peter Sherlock, photo David Beach

Peter Sherlock giving his address

Discerning and Disclosing Wisdom: Professor Sherlock's Address

The address below was given by Professor Peter Sherlock at his commissioning as Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture with Yindyamarra Nguluway on 8 May 2026 at the Centre's Chapel.

I begin as I mean to go on with a spirit of thanksgiving.

I give thanks for God's grace in bringing me to this place at this moment, and for the Spirit's gift of discernment.

Thank you Stan Grant for your trust in taking me on at Yindyamarra Nguluway last year.

Thank you Lin Hatfield Dodds, Bishop Mark Short, the Centre's Board and Charles Sturt University for your confidence in appointing me to this role.

I thank my partner Craig D'Alton, who could not be here this evening, for giving me the freedom and support to take up a role in Canberra.

Thanks to all of you for your many gestures of welcome over the past few months. One of the advantages of coming into this role after a period as your acting Executive Director is that I have had the opportunity to get to know many of you, your stories, and your hopes and dreams.

Thank you to **A Chorus of Women** for your music and to Toni Hassan and her colleagues for the creativity of **this Beyond exhibition**.

And finally, thank you to Jonathan Cole and Sarah Stitt for your extraordinary dedication over the last few years in keeping the Centre afloat and preparing us for the next stage of the voyage. The Centre owes you a great debt.

The Centre begins with theology. What is theology? It is the search for knowledge of God, it demands that we read the signs of the times and the shape of things to come.

My primary academic training is in history, so it is incumbent upon me to remind you that 8 May 2026 is a significant date.

On this day Anglicans commemorate Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic from the other side of the globe. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well – potent words for this turbulent global moment.

On this day my mother commemorates the fortieth anniversary of her ordination to the diaconate in Melbourne. This development continues to be an extraordinary example of how theological imagination can literally change the church and the world. For with God, nothing is impossible.

On this evening the family, friends and colleagues of Jione Havea are gathering in Sydney for a wake, commemorating the untimely death of a Pasifika biblical scholar whose prophetic voice called us to attend to the radical possibilities of God's vision for both church and world.

And on this day exactly ninety-nine years ago a group of Anglican bishops came to this place to dedicate it as the site of a national Anglican cathedral, Australia's Westminster Abbey. Yes, there is a reason my book on Westminster Abbey is being launched here tonight!

All of these commemorations call us to consider wisdom. The Book of Proverbs tells us of wisdom's call:

To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live.

O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

Stan Grant, photo Nika Sinai

Richard Refshauge and Bishop George Browning

Clive Rodger with Bishop Mark Short

Lin Hatfield Dodds, photo Nika Sinai

The Centre's motto is wisdom for the common good. This is undoubtedly what we need at a time like this. But wisdom does not drop miraculously from above. Moreover, finding wisdom is insufficient.

Wisdom must be both discerned and disclosed.

Before we embark on renewal of the Centre's research and public engagement, on renewal of this precious place, we must first ask how we go about the getting of wisdom. I suggest three answers for you tonight.

From Christianity come the two great commandments of the scriptures: love God and love neighbour. They must guide all that we do.

From our location in Canberra, the nation's meeting place, comes the imperative for gathering, for dialogue, for prophetic witness. This is the great opportunity we have been given.

From the Wiradjuri people comes yindyamarra – respect, paying attention, going slowly, being willing to listen. This is how we should conduct our work.

Drawing these three possibilities together indicates the unique role of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture at this time, here in Canberra and across this land.

The Centre begins with theology. What is theology? It is the search for knowledge of God, it demands that we read the signs of the times and the shape of things to come. Unlike most theological colleges and universities that rightly focus on the formation of people for Christian ministry or the intellectual development of theological disciplines, the Centre is called to do something different. This is what my colleague Jonathan Cole has termed "theology plus". We draw theologians into dialogue with experts from other disciplines: economics, the performing arts, politics, education – the possibilities are endless. As I argue in my book Theology Matters this engagement results in surprising new possibilities, out of the box solutions. In attending to the transcendent aspects of existence we can glimpse what lies over the horizon. Theology requires us to confront the reality of death and, in remembering to die, to discover how we might truly live.

"In a time of social division and challenge to the foundations of democracy, our vocation is to host the challenging conversations that others cannot have or are unwilling to have."

Second, of necessity the Centre works through partnerships, not just because our resources are small, but because partnership is fundamental to how we discern and disclose wisdom. This is why we continue to work ecumenically, with people of other faiths, with people of no religious belief. In a time of social division and challenge to the foundations of democracy, our vocation is to host the challenging conversations that others cannot have or are unwilling to have. This means being willing to address conflicts, but it also means having the courage and capacity to imagine, to dream.

Third, the Centre draws on yindyamarra as its ethos, its discipline. The way we host conversations, undertake research, engage with others, is to be characterised by respect. Participation in our activities implies a willingness to listen, to admit I – you – do not have all the answers. Through yindyamarra there is an opportunity, one by one, community by community, to spread light in the darkness and to offer a more gracious way of belonging in this land.

Wayne Hudson and Lynlea Rodger

Bishop George Browning and Bishop Mark Short

Bishop George Browning and Professor Ruth Powell

So our unique task at the Centre is to host the conversations that matter, that inspire, that help shape a world worth living in. In partnership with **NCLS Research** and with **Yindyamarra Nguluway**, several strands of activity are emerging:

1. Economics and theology, where we engage critically with what for the past half century has been the master discipline of our age.
2. The future shape of Christianity, where we describe, analyse, and imagine the signs of the times that God is placing before the church, drawing on robust evidence of the kind gathered by the National Church Life Survey.
3. Education and theology, where we seek to grow the spiritual capacity and wellbeing of children and young people and to improve religious literacy, something Australia desperately needs.
4. First Nations theology and spirituality, where First Peoples and later arrivals together might nurture truly Australian forms of Christianity grounded in these lands and cultures. What could an Australian Bible Commentary look like, developed as a partnership between Australia's many exceptional biblical scholars and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, that in time informed every sermon preached across this vast land?
5. Reimagining this site and how it might be a light on the hill, a place for local community and for shaping our national story. There have been many such visions in the past, from Australia's Westminster Abbey to Bishop Burgmann's hope for a genuinely Australian theology to St Mark's and the Centre as we find them today. Here we will need to tread gently, humbly, and slowly as we discern this site's future purpose.

Finally, as I step into this role as Executive Director, I ask for your support for me and my colleagues – Stan Grant, Dominic O'Sullivan, Liz Laidlaw, Ruth Powell, Jonathan Cole and Sarah Stitt – especially through your prayers, your imagination, and your encouragement.

Events

Pray for Peace Vigil

On 14 December 2025 Australians were shocked by the horrific attack on a Chanukah celebration at Bondi Beach, claiming the lives of 15 people. Within hours, people around the country began to organise gatherings to come together in grief, to express sorrow for those who had died and their families, and to stand in solidarity with Australia's Jewish communities.

The Centre was honoured to work with the Canberra Interfaith Forum to host one such gathering held on the morning of 17 December 2025. Over 100 people gathered for a Prayer Vigil at the Meeting Place, at the stone circle and fireplace on the top of the hill next to the Great Cross.

Led by Amardeep Singh on behalf of the Canberra Interfaith Forum, and attended by faith, community, and political leaders, the Prayer Vigil brought together Canberrans to express their grief and to stand in solidarity with Australia's Jewish community. Speakers highlighted the work required to make Australia a society where all can live in peace without fear, recognising that terrorism only wins if it divides us from each other.

Flowers representing the 15 victims were picked from the Centre's Bible Garden, a collection of plants found in the Jewish scriptures, and placed in ashes as a symbol of life in the midst of death. This powerful, much-needed ceremony demonstrated the Centre's role as a meeting place, bringing together diverse sections of Australian society to remember, to grieve, and to work for peace.

The Meeting Place, Pray for Peace Vigil

Ecumenical Way of the Cross

By Robbie Tulip

Chair, ACT Churches Council

For many years the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture has hosted an ecumenical event on Good Friday, bringing Canberra Christians together to walk with Jesus from the Last Supper through his trial, crucifixion and resurrection.

In 2026 the Way of the Cross was jointly arranged by the ACT Churches Council and the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Seminarians and other young Catholics acted each station of the cross, beginning in the Chapel and ending at the Great Cross. Readings and reflections were given by representatives of different churches, including Anglican Primate Bishop Mark Short and Catholic Archbishop Christopher Prowse. A musical quartet led the congregation in Easter hymns and Taize chants. Well over one hundred people attended, including Christians from across traditions — Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Pentecostal and Uniting.

In closing remarks, Archbishop Prowse reflected on the tension we all feel in a world overshadowed by darkness, conflict and heavy news — and yet, a day filled with light as we look toward Easter. "We know the world in which we live is dark … but here we are gathered around the Great Cross," he said.

Shared prayers for unity and for peace reflected ecumenical hopes for greater dialogue and fellowship among Canberra's Christian churches.

Photos supplied by Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

Jesus falls

The Last Supper

Nailing to the cross

Under the Great Cross

Vigil candlelit lanterns

ANZAC Eve Peace Vigil

ANZAC Day in Canberra is huge. Thousands of people gather for the Dawn Service at the Australian War Memorial to remember those who have fought and died, the ultimate sacrifice, for our values and country.

On ANZAC Eve a more modest but poignant community ceremony is held. Members of A Chorus of Women and volunteers, in collaboration with others in the community have hosted an ANZAC Eve Peace Vigil every year since 2011, except for 2020 when they went **online during the pandemic**. For the past two years it has been held in the beautiful landscape setting on the small hill at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

Many believe a silence remains in our country's public commemorations. We do not hear about all the people who have been impacted by war, especially the silence surrounding our First Nations' experiences of the Frontier Wars. We hear little of the lamentation and hearts' yearning for peace that would sound if we expressed the private anguish that is always crying in wartime's loss, terror, horror, and fear-filled nights of worry and waiting. In holding this ceremony, we seek to remember all the victims of war and violence and to respectfully re-imagine our commemoration of Australia's war history.

The community arrives as the sun begins to set and concurrently the candlelit lanterns subtly come to light. All are skilfully led in singing community peace songs and taught refrains for songs in preparation for the inclusive ceremony in which they will share. Singing together 'Lest we forget' the participants solemnly process to the Place of Meeting around the fire where together they lament the tragedy and trauma of war and at the same time give expression for their longing for peace. A Chorus of Women with their friends the Wayfarers and other leaders bring the community along on a heartfelt journey as they move through this beautiful ceremony of deep thought and shared emotion.

From the haunting lyrics of **Spirit Songs for ANZAC Eve**, listening to the grandmother voices of a settler woman and traditional owner sharing their grief - around the fire we mourn, all travel through their shared experiences of grief to the community commitment to peace and the 'Ode to Future Generations'.

The ANZAC Eve Peace Vigil generates a peaceful, warm, friendly atmosphere as dusk falls and the lanterns brighten. For many this ceremony has been the most beautiful and meaningful ANZAC commemoration they have experienced.

Kyrie Eleison: Exhibition by Michael Galovic

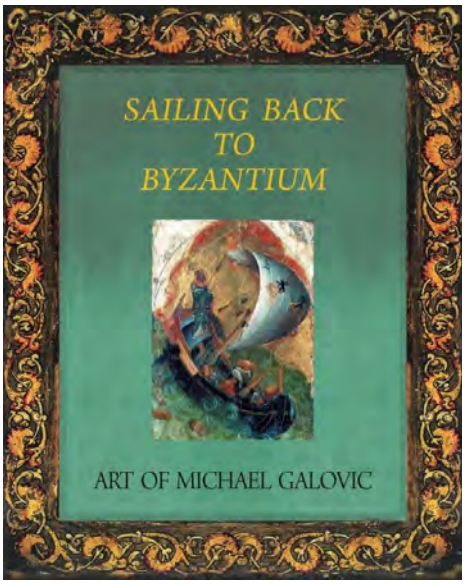
During March and April 2026, the Centre was host to a new exhibition by Michael Galovic. Destruction, beauty and hope co-exist in this body of work.

Initially inspired by the September 11 event, these artworks transcend one single event and refer to all destruction done by man to his fellow humans.

The imagery of graphic ruination is juxtaposed and intertwined with the solemn beauty of medieval art of icons and frescoes. Through depictions of the Crucifixion, Deposition from the Cross, and Lamentation, the artist reminds us of the death of The Son of Man while paying tribute to the timeless beauty of the sacred art.

The innate propensity of mankind for harm and devastation may seem hopeless for the future of our kind.

The title of this most unusual series of artworks with its last piece gives us an answer.



Lamentation in the Towers 2025 – Michael Galovic

Address at the *Kyrie Eleison* Exhibition Opening

By Wayne Hudson

Professor Wayne Hudson, one of the Centre's most active adjunct researchers, gave the following address at the opening of the exhibition on 11 March 2026.

Michael Galovic's ikons and religious paintings draw on a tradition thousands of years in the making, while introducing elements that are radically new. Much of his work is translucent and other worldly in the Byzantine tradition, but also creative, original and extensional. It speaks powerfully to secular audiences because the content to which his iconography refers is present in the best works themselves. Australians are awestruck in the presence of art which seeks to repeat what has been achieved before and also stimulated by works which are clearly contemporary.

Michael's work addresses the sacred, but it often does so in a radically modern perspective. The traditionally religious are animated by the devotional quality in many of his works and it is no surprise that his work is now displayed in over a hundred churches and institutions. The postreligious, however, are also drawn in by sacral elements which embody a coherence and intensity which has been largely lost in the modern West. In Michael's work the sacral is re-presented to the religious, the postreligious and the postsecular alike as something which belongs to our cosmo-anthropological reality, to use a term from Orthodox theology. In the same way, Michael's art is ethnically specific, but also universal, and so offers a critique of the empty universalism of Western secularism. Michael is always ready to embrace the new, while renewing the ancient. His achievement is to transcend divisions between times and places by evoking them in a way that recharges our cultural memories.

Kyrie Eleison exhibition opening Wayne Hudson, Michael Galovic and Peter Sherlock

Michael's latest exhibition, *Kyrie Eleison*, demonstrates the continuing power of his work. Michael is not only an iconographer. He produces polysemantic work which refuses a single interpretation. He combines iconography in the Serbian Orthodox tradition with radicalisms that addresses multiple Australian audiences. Michael draws his inspiration from Orthodox theology. In his work the tension between icons as dualistic sacral presentations which direct our attention away from the real world and its problems and icons as immanent presences is overcome. In the same way, the distance between the divine and the human which becomes extreme in some forms of Protestantism does not appear in Michael's work. Instead, anthropology and cosmosophy or a sacral interpretation of the universe interpenetrate. The Protestant emphasis on subjective faith is not present. Instead, the Orthodox emphasis on the salvation of the entire universe, including all peoples and animals, is presented as something glorious which does not depend on human actions or beliefs. This gives his work intensity, especially when he relates it to the dangerously disordered present or to eschatological events such as September 11

Characteristically, Michael addresses the events of September 11 from both apocalyptical and eschatological perspectives. Consistent with Orthodox theology, his work is oriented towards the eschatology which appears in the present. It is about the salvation of the universe, including all people and all animals, and is based on the eschatological hope that the divine mercy will eventually prevail. His theology is theocentric and not the pietism of much of the Western church which equates salvation with the salvation of individuals who hold the correct theological beliefs. In Michael's art the sacral is related to divine redeeming power. With this in mind, we might attempt to read his icons as a process rather than as merely separate images. We will then experience the tension between Michael's traditionalism and his debts to Cubism and Picasso. We will also perhaps experience the tension between the ikon as the representation of a hierarchic order and the ikon as a dialectical critique of the world at hand.

The eight panels presented here are individual but also moments in a process which ends with a stunning image of Christ. The soteriology is not individual but cosmic. The remembrances of Picasso and the Cubists terminate in the finality of Yves Klein's blue and with the hope that the divine Mercy will appear.

Michael Galovic is a master magician, and we are immensely proud that he has chosen to work his magic is Australia.

BEYOND Exhibition

By Kati Görgényi, Artist

The exhibition *Beyond*, showing four artists' works took place between 6 and 23 May 2026 in the Chapel at Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

I was one of the lucky ones to be able to exhibit in this beautiful space, which I had known for a while; first as a singer with A Chorus of Women, who have been artists-in-residence for some years, as a participant with a collaborative art work at a Peace concert organised by the Chorus, a stitching workshop and as an audience member for several concerts.

Beyond was conceived by **Toni Hassan** with questions: 'How do we sit with and make sense of what we are seeing and hearing about the world via various forms of media?' Newspapers became a common material for our explorations and reflections.

My works question the ways in which the constant, beyond-belief media-dump affects me. In developing them I explore strategies with which to comprehend and co-exist with all of the disturbing news. Newspapers are the original mass medium by which news was disseminated so I use them here to create installations and encaustic paintings. In the process, I recycle, reform and reshape the material with the aim of creating an alternative environment.

When I think about what has been chanelled to me through various media, what really strikes me is the way I had been trying to push away this reality, deliberately avoiding watching or listening to the news, the stream of misery, violence and deceit as it was too hard to endure. The things that happen and get uttered, occupy space and gain traction in the media seem increasingly absurd. In just a single day's paper the destruction of countless lives and even of entire regions can be seen, the disappearance of forests and wildlife, alongside trivia such as advertisements, travel tips, sport results, stock market reports, which seem to normalise it all.

Many people ask similar questions: What can we as individuals do, and does it even matter if we speak out?

As I observed my path of avoidance, I realised the energy and joy that came from transforming and subverting the newspaper, making its matter stronger under my hands. Rolling soft paper to form a more solid shape in a repetitive, meditative, energetic way gives me a sense of purpose and agency. I somehow gain some control by transforming and reforming my physical world; it is I who grows these trees now.

A community of silent collaborators joined me through their kind contributions of their plant pots and newspapers to materialise these works.

Photos by Toni Hassan

Saturday Paper Prayer 2 by Toni Hassan

Beyond exhibition opening crowd

Mary Mary quite contrary: how does your garden grow? Installation by Kati Görgényi

Commonwealth Day

Unlocking Opportunities Together: The 2026 Commonwealth Day Multifaith Ceremony

Imagine a world filled with good will, when all people can come together to celebrate their commonality and their difference. An occasion such as this was held on 9 March in the Chapel of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University. This celebration embraces the Centre's commitment to wisdom for the common good and the "spirit of unity through diversity" and has been hosted here since 2007. The Commonwealth Day Multifaith Ceremony brings together interfaith representatives and multicultural performances, High Commissioners and the community to celebrate the 56 countries of the Commonwealth of Nations.

The ceremony began with the arrival of the Governor-General, Her Excellency Sam Mostyn AO, being greeted and escorted to the venue by Fijian Warriors and a Lali drummer. The Papua New Guinea Peroveta Singers sang everyone into the venue, all rose for the entrance of the Governor-General and once seated the Prosperous Mountain Dragon and Lion dancers welcomed the gathering with an energetic, extremely sound breaking, colourful performance.

Photos by, The Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General, Dustin Anderson

The Governor-General, Her Excellency the Honourable Ms Sam Mostyn AC and Mr. David Smith MP

Following the Welcome to Country from Warren Daley, Ngunnawal Elder, A Chorus of Women's Johanna McBride taught and invited the attendees to join in with her song 'Ubuntu' a Zulu word meaning "I am who I am because of you, we are who we are because of each other" setting the scene for community spirit.

Professor Peter Sherlock introduced and invited the Governor-General to address the gathering. She generously praised all that had gone before and what was to come, reflecting on the importance of the Commonwealth family. As the Crown's Australian representative Her Excellency delivered King Charles III's message for the themUnlocking Opportunities Together for a prosperous Commonwealth.

The King's message reflected on the challenges our world faces – conflict, climate change and global transformation, along with positive possibilities for the future. The King focused on the enduring strengths of the Commonwealth of Nations encouraging member countries to work together. He emphasised, "Working together, we can ensure that the Commonwealth continues to stand as a force for good – grounded in community, committed to the kind of restorative sustainability that has a return on investment, enriched by culture, steadfast in its care for our planet, and united in friendship and in the service of its people." **The King's Commonwealth Day Message 2026** can be read here.

Kanti and Jyoti Jinna greeting the Governor General

Prospersous Mountain Dragon and Lion dancers and the Governor General

The message from the Prime Minister, the Honourable Anthony Albanese MP read by David Smith MP acknowledged our "shared values and common history" concluding with Australia looking forward to "furthering this great institution's work towards global peace and prosperity." Professor Matthew Neuhaus, President of the Royal Commonwealth Society, was invited to reflect upon these significant messages. The Bell then tolled for each of the member countries, 56 times, thanks to the bell ringers of St Paul's, Manuka.

The greetings completed, prayers were delivered by the interfaith representatives – Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain and Sikh – with Amardeep Singh, Chair of the Canberra Interfaith Forum reflecting on their offerings noting their prayers focused on our shared humanity far outweighing what divides us. He said the faith leaders offered a powerful reminder, to "Recognise the whole human race as one. This is not only a spiritual teaching, but also a blueprint for peace."

Two beautiful and very different dance performances followed from the Cook Island dancers, Te Hani O Tiare Production and an Indian dance pair from the dance school, Renga Nrithyalaya. Te Hani O Tiare dedicated their piece to the Governor-General with the hope the music and dance empowers and encourages her "as she continues breaking barriers and setting a powerful example for young Australian women."

The costumes and dance performance of the young Indian dancers brought another dimension to the ceremony. They were gracious and showed dedication to their art. A Chorus of Women again brought the community together as one in song with Johanna McBride teaching the refrain to 'We are the People.' All sang up into the ceremony accompanied by pianist Lynne Kowalski with the Chapel lending its wonderful acoustic.

Kanti Jinna OAM MoF thanked the Governor-General for attending and being an integral part of the ceremony. He also thanked all who had made the day a success, the Commonwealth Day Ceremony Committee, the interfaith representatives, the cultural performers and the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture for hosting.

All were invited to convene outside for a light snack, to listen to The Passion and Purpose Academy from the African community perform and to mingle with Her Excellency, the Governor-General, and the multi-cultural community. The occasion was joyful, colourful and harmonious celebrating our desire to live on our beautiful planet as one. All thanks to everyone who worked hard to make this event welcoming and successful. The committee now looks to the planning of the 2027 Commonwealth Day Multifaith Ceremony to be held from 11am on Monday 8 March.

Fijian Warriors

A Chorus of Women

Site

Caring for Country: Cool Burn at St Mark's Grassland

A fantastic turn out of onlookers were greeted by Jack Klem from the Molonglo Conservation Group and his team leader, Jeannine Fromholtz, the organisers of this season's cool burn for the St Mark's Grassland. The Rural Fire Service volunteers were there ready to assist if the fire needed containing. It transpired that the window for the burn was perfect. The previous week we had received rain, cooling the ground and adding moisture to the vegetation and air. Saturday was overcast, low wind, cool but pleasant.

Following some introductions, Ngunnawal Elders Uncle Wally Bell and Karen Denny, led the burn. Approximately 40 people attended to watch, learn and participate. An area of the Grassland had been prepared outlining where to burn and removing materials which would have caused the fire to burn too hot. The objective of the burn is to remove the thatch/biomass which smothers the native plants potentially preventing the mid to late Spring flowering and the production of seeds. The burn also assists with weed control. Since 2018 two burns have taken place. Following both these burns, approximately 18 months later, the Grassland flowering has been phenomenal.

Photos by volunteer Muhammad Fahri

1. Lighting the fire

2. Helpers at hand

3. Keeping the fire cool

4. All participating

In the case of this burn an area was chosen which had not received this treatment in April 2024. This is a deliberate process called the mosaic burn, leaving areas free for small vertebrate and non-vertebrate to relocate or burrow more deeply as the fire comes through.

Following the burn it was forecast to rain again. This helps soak the potash into the soil; the perfect fertiliser and follow-up. All who attended, especially the organisers, went away content with their participation and new knowledge.

This project was made possible through an ACT Government Environment Grant and will see works continue on-site with planting of native species and further weed control with the help of Molonglo Conservation Group, Friends of Grasslands and students from Canberra Institute of Technology.

5. Rural Fire Service keeping control of the fire

6. On the edge

7. It's over, wait and see

St Mark's Grassland in autumn

Sarah Sharp and Rebecca Vassarotti

Sarah Sharp in the Grassland

Grasslands Advocate Farewelled

St Mark's Grassland, located on the lands subleased from the Anglican Church by the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture and **St Mark's National Theological Institute** at **Charles Sturt University**, is a place of enormous environmental significance. Home to indigenous grasses and rare native plants, they are one of Canberra's best examples of a natural temperate grassland.

In April 2026 the Centre's Chapel played host to a farewell for Sarah Sharp ahead of her move away from Canberra to recognise her exceptional role for over 35 years in caring and advocating for the Grassland. The farewell was attended by more than 90 people from across Canberra, indicative of the high respect for her work and passion.

When Sarah first began her environmental career, grasslands were not considered important. Until 1980, grasslands were considered sub-standard eco-systems, and still by 1991 they were being ignored in the 'Bush Capital'. From 1992, whilst in the employ the of ACT Environment Department, Sarah assisted in creating the **Grassland Recovery Program** and began monitoring St Mark's Grassland.

The department very quickly became aware that it would not have the capacity to care for these fragile environments on its own. Sarah and her colleagues suggested the community be invited to help, and in 1994 the ACT Friends of Grasslands (FoG) was established. Since then, Sarah has served variously as President, Secretary and committee member.

The farewell was organised by **ACT Friends of Grasslands**, **Landcare ACT** and the ACT Department of Environment, and chaired by President of the Friends, Dr Jamie Pittock. Michael Mulvaney summed up the occasion when he quipped that "Sarah has created a revolution". The event concluded with Sarah's own words in farewell:

We need to tread more lightly. This is not your land, not my land, it is ours.

Renewal in the Bible Garden

The Bible Garden and its precinct have been experiencing some renewal.

The rise to the path leading to the International Aid Workers Memorial has a new hedge of callistemons planted alongside it. This hedge is to assist in retaining the mulch which otherwise falls away from the hillside leaving bare earth. It is a functional way to enhance the garden, and when it is taller and in flower will be lovely to experience.

Following on from this to assist in maintaining the existing callistemon hedge encircling the Labyrinth, a Cor-ten steel border has been installed along with a new watering system and mulch. We are really pleased with the outcome. The Labyrinth looks more defined, and enlivened. This will improve plant health and long-term sustainability.

As one departs the Bible Garden menorah on the northern side the once quite developed erosion has been addressed by planting lawn. This is coming along nicely and, in doing so, is helping keep the community safe.

When the weather warms again the Bible Garden pergola will receive a refresh as well. Wait and see.

2026 Labyrinth

Turf

Labyrinth upgrade in progress

Callistemon hedge

Labyrinth

Research

Welcome Professor Ruth Powell, NCLS Research

The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is delighted to announce the appointment of Dr Ruth Powell as Professor at Charles Sturt University and as a member of the academic staff of the Centre.

Professor Powell, a social scientist specialising in religious organisational studies, is the Executive Director of NCLS Research, a role she will continue to hold in conjunction with her part-time employment at the Centre. The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has been conducted every five years since 1991 and is the largest, longest running survey of local church life in the world.

Professor Peter Sherlock (Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture and of Yindyamarra Nguluway) said:

"Congratulations to Professor Ruth Powell on her appointment and the recognition of her outstanding contributions as a leader and researcher for over thirty years. Through NCLS Research, Professor Powell has transformed understanding of Australian Christianity and the role that Australia's churches play in Australian society, resourcing church leaders, educators, and policy makers to shape a world worth living in."

"Professor Powell's expertise, and her skills in research translation and capacity-building, are significant assets to the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture as we aim to understand and influence the future shape of Australian Christianity. We look forward to deepening our partnership with NCLS Research and delivering research outcomes that benefit all Australians."

Professor Ruth Powell (Executive Director, NCLS Research) said:

"I am delighted to contribute to the work of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. The strong alignment between the Centre and NCLS Research creates a powerful platform for collaboration. We share a commitment to rigorous, futurefocused research that serves both church and society. I look forward to producing research that supports informed public understanding and helps shape constructive conversations about the future of Christianity in Australia."

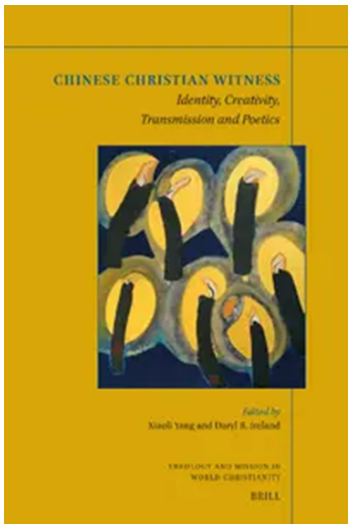
The 2026 NCLS will include a new set of questions relating to First Nations participation and engagement in Australia's churches through a project jointly conducted with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture and Yindyamarra Nguluway and generously funded by donors.

The Centre is seeking further funds to support this partnership, as a critical way to continue to develop evidence-based understandings of Christianity in Australia and its intersections with wider society.

Professor Ruth Powell, Executive Director of NCLS Research

The Making of Chinese Christian Witness

By Xiaoli Yang



In 2016, the year after I finished my PhD, I was eager to find like-minded scholars to network with and gain intellectual stimulation after a season of isolated doctoral research. By accident, I learned about the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), a professional body of scholars in Mission Studies and World Christianity. They were to hold their quadrennial Assembly in South Korea later that year. It was there that I met some soon-to-be friends and engaged in informal but passionate conversations in hallways and over meals about the rise of Chinese Christianity from a missiological lens. Because the conference format limited cross-group exchange, we proposed a dedicated Chinese missiology track to engage with the topic. At that conference, I met Dr Steve B. Bevans (SVD) and also the society's President at the time Dr Paul Kollman (CSC), both well-known Catholic theologians, who were firmly supportive and encouraging. I knew that the vision of studying Chinese Missiology, especially from an insider's perspective, was pioneering in academia and worthy of scholarly attention and exploration.

Although those prospective conversations were postponed by COVID, when IAMS reconvened in 2022, space was granted to explore specifically the various ways Chinese Christian witness takes shape, both historically and in the present. Some of those presentations were published in a special issue on *Chinese Missiology in Mission Studies* 2022. It became clear that Chinese Christians, not just in the mainland but around the world, were developing explicit and implicit theologies of mission that needed further and deeper reflection.

Chinese Christianity is indeed one of the most remarkable growth stories in global Christianity. Following the devastation of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when Christianity was silenced and suppressed with no sign of public life, today it has reemerged dramatically with more than one million Chinese people becoming Christians each year, and the total number is well over 100 million worldwide. Yet Chinese Missiology has not received adequate attention, as Chinese people bear witness to Jesus (Acts 1:8) in their daily lives, communities, churches, and societies. This volume is the first rigorous, scholarly attempt to map the broader landscape of Chinese Christian witness across traditions and continents, exploring how Chinese Christians have understood and participated in mission over the past few centuries.

"This volume is the first rigorous, scholarly attempt to map the broader landscape of Chinese Christian witness across traditions and continents."

It is crafted around the themes of identity, creativity, transmission, and poetics to depict a process of indigenisation within a culture. To bring together diverse perspectives, I invited my co-editor, Dr Daryl Ireland from Boston University, to put our heads together to extend the invitation to friends and colleagues around the world to contribute their expertise through various topics. Research on Chinese Missiology is, for many of us, undertaken out of passion rather than career advancement. We are so grateful that most of them accepted our invitation. It is the collaborative spirit and friendship that enabled the publication of a rich collection of eighteen scholarly chapters on Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Chinese-initiated movements, covering Chinese Christians in Oceania, Africa, Europe, and Asia, as well as both registered and unregistered churches in the People's Republic of China.

One distinctive feature is that the book also considers multiple artworks by Chinese Christians from Mainland China: films, plays, novels, poems, paintings, sculptures and hymns. These "poetics" provide an opportunity to discover Chinese missiology through understudied media. Seven prominent contemporary Chinese Christian artists reflect on their creative processes in their native language. Their reflections correspond to the three themes of this volume: identity, creativity and transmission like "icing on the cake". It was challenging to find ways to express the creative process and the descriptions of these artists' artworks from Chinese into English—a "trans-creative" process that demands a high level of cultural insight and linguistic creativity. In the last chapter, I curate these artists' works by exploring their cultural, social and spiritual dispositions, and attempt to provide a comprehensive description and exegesis of their artworks. Thankfully, with the help of the team and our copyeditor Jeanette Lee, and funding support from institutions such as Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, we were able to present this multi-paradigmatic volume with colourful artwork to the world.

"By amplifying insider perspectives and the voices of Chinese artists, this work contributes a distinctive and emerging missiological voice to World Christianity."

There were times of frustration, however, that demanded patience and perseverance during the project's years, especially when difficulties were encountered in finding peer reviewers after COVID-19. It was then that we drew strength, wisdom and encouragement from one another. The two editors' skills complemented each other—one is more visionary and the other more meticulous. It is friendship that motivated us to work odd hours, as the time difference between Australia and the USA creates no natural window for collaborative work.

We are grateful for the many positive responses from our recent worldwide online book launch event. One Chinese artist who was not able to connect online reflected his writing process:

> "I learned that Dr Yang wanted to collect more outstanding Chinese poems to uncover the spiritual voices of this generation that have been forgotten. I believe it is because of her faith and efforts that I can share this with brothers and sisters scattered around the world … 'The Lost Homeland' is about the displacement, wandering, and searching of a generation. Today, I am deeply moved that this piece has been included in the broader theme of 'Chinese Christian Witness'. Loss is never the end, but rather a path where we always hold on to hope and redemption and live out our testimony. We are fellow travellers on the same path. Some seek truth through research, some express their feelings through painting, and others record history with their cameras. I try to use my poetry to speak for lost souls and the hope of redemption … We were strangers but now we meet through words, support each other in our faith, and bear witness to one another."

Our cover page features the work of Daozi (1956–2025), a well-known Chinese Christian artist and literary critic, whom I visited in a hospital in Beijing just a couple of months before he passed away last year. The painting entitled "The Seven Candles" symbolises the radiance of the disciples' inner spirituality, as well as the formation of transparent, vibrant colours within the fellowship of the church. The burning golden light on a dark canvas speaks of the essence of Chinese Christian spirituality; their witness is often borne within the context of adversity and trauma, yet the flames burn even more brightly in the darkness. Precisely within their poetics, poignant beauty reveals pain, perseverance and hope, which are Christian virtues.

From the networking at a conference in 2016, to an edited journal publication in 2022, and now the first volume addressing Chinese Missiology, the journey has been long, but rewarding. We believe the interdisciplinary, intergenerational, interdenominational, and ecumenical character of this volume illuminates the breadth and depth of Chinese Christian witness in both local and global contexts. By amplifying insider perspectives and the voices of Chinese artists, this work contributes a distinctive and emerging missiological voice to World Christianity. As an anonymous peer reviewer says, "the unique piece of research in the field of missiology and mission studies offers an eye-opening perspective on the phenomenon, which might become one of the main factors moulding world Christianity in the decades to come. No other publication like this exists yet. This should be a must for anyone interested in the future development of the global church".

Rev. Xiaoli Yang

2026 HG Brennan Lecture and Workshop

The HG Brennan lecture and workshop are named after the renowned Christian economist and political philosopher Geoffrey Brennan, who was a pioneer and champion of dialogue between economists and theologians in Australia. On 29 January, Brennan's son, Michael Brennan, CEO of the economic policy think tank e61 and a notable economist in his own right, gave the third annual HG Brennan lecture to more than 70 people, in which he explored some of the ways in which the economist and theologian might be able to apply their distinctive methods and knowledges in a complementary fashion for the common good. The whole text of the lecture is included in this issue, below.

"Dialogue between economists and theologians, even Christian economists and theologians, is notoriously difficult."

Dialogue between economists and theologians, even Christian economists and theologians, is notoriously difficult. While there is plenty of common ground between the two groups—both have much to say about poverty, for example—their different methodologies make dialogue challenging.

Fostering a fruitful dialogue between Christian economists and theologians under the Yindyamarra ethos of conversation that engages critically with different ideas in a spirit of respect and a willingness to listen is precisely what the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture seeks to do with its annual HG Brennan lecture and workshop in economics and theology.

Michael noted that economists generally seek to identify, aggregate and maximise desires in large population sets, with their analysis primarily aimed at addressing efficacious means for the realisation of the ends people choose. This is essentially the function of Adam Smith's famous hidden hand. He further observed that this economic method relies on a set of robust and healthy institutions which can serve as economic levers for policy makers.

But what is the economist to do in an age in which this vital institutional order is under intense pressure in a highly polarised and sceptical society, with some risk that it descends into disorder? This, according to Michael, is where theology, and Christianity more broadly, has an important role to play, a role that the economist is neither trained nor equipped to perform: a view of virtue and how to inculcate it in individuals and communities. Michael's key insight is that the methodology of the economist, indeed the economist's worldview, is not adept at shaping, nor critiquing, people's desires. It is about efficient means, not ends; this is the way economists are trained to view the world.

Theologians, on the other hand, are preoccupied with ends, especially ultimate ends, including that of the human being and its desires. In a fractious and anxious world under institutional assault, we desperately need institutions like the church and the moral framework of Christianity to form virtuous citizens with a strong conception of the common good and their duties to it.

The two-day workshop that immediately followed the lecture focused specifically on the question of inequality, and was attended by 25 economists and theologians. The workshop discussed three pre-circulated papers, one surveying the economic and theological literature on the causes of inequality, by Centre Adjunct Research Professor Paul Oslington, another on New Testament views of inequality, by Rev Dr Deborah Storie (Whitly College, University of Divinity), and a final paper on inequality from the perspective of Catholic social teaching by Professor Robert Gascoigne (Australian Catholic University).

The discussions generated by these excellent papers were wide-ranging, covering everything from contemporary tax policy to the precise meaning of "poor" in New Testament Greek. The workshop did not resolve any of the major questions surrounding contemporary inequality—an impossible task well beyond the scope of the workshop, not to mention beyond the capacities of the entire political and economic class in every Western society on Earth. It did, however, showcase the kind of complementarity and integration that Michael Brennan called for in his lecture, as economists and theologians sought to grapple together with the nature and effects of inequality in our society, both brining their unique methodologies and insights to the table in mutually enriching ways.

Michael Brennan lecture

Invisible Hands and Divided Hearts: The 2026 HG Brennan Lecture

Author – Michael Brennan

This is the lightly edited text of the third annual HG Brennan lecture in economics and theology, given by Michael Brennan at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture 29 January 2026. Michael Brennan is an economist and experienced public policy professional. He is currently CEO of the e61 Institute, a non-partisan economic research institute. He was previously Chair of the Productivity Commission, and before that was a Deputy Secretary in the Commonwealth Treasury and also a Deputy Secretary in the Victorian Treasury. He has served as an adviser and Chief of Staff to Treasurers and Finance Ministers at the State and Federal level. He is the son of the noted Christian philosopher and economist, Geoffrey (HG) Brennan, in whose honour the lecture is named.

'And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.'

These are the final lines of Dover Beach, by Matthew Arnold. It is a poem about the retreat of certitude, the loss of collective faith, and the strife and the moral and intellectual confusion that rise from that void.

It was a favourite of HG Brennan.

It is apt for our current moment, where once accepted norms and institutions are under threat, where traditional centres of authority seem unequal to the task, and erstwhile order gives way to fragmentation and chaos.

HG Brennan was an economist and a Christian. His intellectual interests were famously inter-disciplinary. And he wrote about, and contributed to, the dialogue between economists and theologians.

He excelled at clarifying the terms of debate: marking out the true areas of tension, and those where there could be some meeting of minds. A piece he wrote with Tony Waterman talked about the convergence and clash between economic and theological viewpoints.

Tonight I want to explore an area of convergence, potential compatibility. One which I think is under-appreciated – an element central to both economics and Christianity but which both disciplines have tended at times to gloss over or even forget.

The unifying theme is this: both economics and Christianity start with a sober view of human imperfection and frailty. They differ in their approach, but neither the economist nor the theologian is naïve about the nature of the individual. The economist sees self-interest, the Christian sees original sin. Neither sees saintliness, pure altruism, nobility or the prospect of perfection in this life.

Yet somehow neither the economist nor the theologian despair at that reality. Both offer their own way forward: a source of some hope despite a starting point built on brute realism.

Economics starts with an assumption of self-interest – people are broadly rational and try to maximise their well-being. That well-being is based on a set of preferences describing the strength of their desire for different goods and services, or other things.

Perhaps surprisingly, economists have never really agreed on whether their assumption of rationality (described as homo economicus) requires narrow selfishness, or can accommodate broad interests, like a concern for others.

For most purposes, self-interest takes the narrow form: well-being (or utility) is based purely on one's own consumption of desired goods and services. It's the standard assumption of mainstream economic models.

It's highly tractable and yields reasonable predictions. And it scales – it allows us to say something about how individual actions aggregate up into societal outcomes, particularly via prices – which are both a result of individual actions and a form of information that shapes said actions.

That gives economists a rich theory of social organisation, including the overall welfare (or well-being) implications of different policies, rules, or external events.

But for a Christian, the psychological foundations of the economist's perspective are decidedly thin. There is no deep theory of introspection, no deliberation or internal struggle and no account of why preferences came to be what they are, or how they could change.

"Compared with economics, Christian theology has a far richer account of the person, but a less coherent or unified theory of society."

Once preferences have been formed and revealed, the economist gives primacy to them. There is only one test of a social outcome – how well it meets the preferences individuals actually have.

Christian theology is different. Unlike economics, it offers a rich account of personal moral struggle. Through Christian teaching we understand competing moral motivations: between love and sin, greed and generosity, pride and humility, and a sense that these battle for supremacy within the human soul.

We see that we can act with moral virtue at one moment and succumb to greed or vanity at the next, even when nothing external has changed. As Paul says in Romans 7:23

"But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

So Christianity teaches us about the role of moral effort, of temptation, and falling short.

Systems of secular ethics have that too, but Christianity adds something else: forgiveness and grace. In that sense, despite our weaknesses, Christianity has always had a tinge of optimism. But not just idle hope; more a personal imperative. Our personal inner conflict participates in an eternal, cosmic battle between good and evil. It has this almost fractal quality.

I am reminded of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's immortal words:

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor political parties either – but right through every human heart. And through all human hearts."

That quote also captures a difficulty: The rich personal anthropology of Christian moral struggle does not easily shed light on the ideal forms of social organisation – mediated through states, classes or political parties.

Compared with economics, Christian theology has a far richer account of the person, but a less coherent or unified theory of society.

It just isn't social science in the same way. It's not that Christianity has nothing at all to say—there are institutions which are evil, for example, such as slavery. And political philosophies—Nazism, for example—which are, at their core, dark and completely opposed to Christian teaching.

But, in general, it's hard for theologians to offer a blueprint for social or political order. On this front, scripture is ambiguous and lacks detail. In Christ's own words, his Kingdom is not of this world.

It's also true that there are well established moral duties for individuals that don't easily translate into a workable social rule. Christians have a duty to forgive and turn the other cheek. But is that a feasible basis for a legal system?

We certainly want to create space for forgiveness and reconciliation. However, no one seriously argues that the State should just forgive every crime.

The personal duty is real, but does not easily scale to a social rule.

And then there is another sticking point. The economist's benchmark for judging social outcomes is the extent to which the underlying preferences of individuals are met. The theologian can't readily accept that benchmark: people's wants cannot be decisive because people are morally broken. We don't want the right things. So satisfying our desires can't be the sole objective of policy.

It's an open question what we should do about that. Should people only get what we think they should want? By what mechanism? By whose design? Could we perhaps put theologians in charge and get them to determine what each person and family should consume?

And why are economists, who are not especially bad people, so sanguine about their starting point assumption of self-interest? It's because the mechanism that is central to economics—the invisible hand—is much more widespread and powerful than is generally acknowledged, particularly in abstract intellectual discussions.

The term gets its name from Adam Smith who, in The Wealth of Nations, noted the tendency for people pursuing their own interests to be driven—as though by an invisible hand—to promote an end (a broader public benefit) which was no part of their original intention.

His most concrete expression of the idea is as follows:

"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages."

Smith points to the extraordinary web of complex social cooperation in a commercial society—even in 1776, the year The Wealth of Nations was published—with diverse benefits for the participants, but which comes about without any particular altruism on their part.

Phillip Wicksteed, a Unitarian Minister and economist—author of a famous economics textbook called The Common Sense of Political Economy—described it thus:

"By teaching Greek to men who can neither make shoes nor drive an engine, I get myself shod and carried by men who have no wish to be taught Greek."

He goes on to say:

"By the organisation of industrial society we can secure the co-operation of countless individuals of whom we know nothing, in directing the resources of the world towards objects in which they have no interest."

I raise this with some trepidation. It is common in some intellectual circles to caricature or dismiss the invisible hand, to suggest that it is just a convenient mythology, or something 'nice in theory' but absent in practice, either altogether false, or practically insignificant.

I think that view is grievously mistaken. It picks the wrong target. Of course there are naïve interpretations, but practically speaking, the invisible hand is very real and very significant. It can be hard to grasp because its invisible, or hiding in plain sight. But basic introspection makes the point.

Whatever interactions I have had with people today – with my wife and children, the people I met walking the dog, or fellow conference participants here tonight – they are completely swamped by the much greater number of implicit interactions I had with countless people I have never met and (if I am honest) have never thought about.

The breakfast I ate, the clothes I am wearing, this lectern, the building we are in, and the transport I took to get here involved vast interactions (some many steps removed) that were all to my benefit. And unconsciously I conferred great benefits on those countless other people, as everyone reading this has in the course of their day.

For the avoidance of doubt, this is not about claiming that greed is good. Greed is not good. But none of those actions I mentioned—eating breakfast or wearing clothes—were greedy. They were purposive actions, albeit impersonal interactions.

And the invisible hand, as Smith conceived it, pertains to impersonal interactions. In a complex, modern society, that accounts for much of what we do.

There is a flipside, however. Those aforementioned actions of mine—eating breakfast and wearing clothes—were not especially virtuous on my part, even if they conferred a benefit on others.

The invisible hand is not an instrument of sanctification. Some thinkers have come close to making that claim, although few would agree.

"The narrow economic account reassures us that human frailty can be beneficial for others. But it doesn't leave or create much room for goodness."

It does, however, limit the downside of our human frailty. Subject to some basic norms of honest conduct, we know that, overwhelmingly, those countless impersonal interactions have done good, not harm.

The issue with the invisible hand is not that it is unrealistic or insignificant. It is that the good that it produces is contingent: it relies on institutions, rules, norms and moral underpinnings to do its work. In places where those fail, there can be no presumption that self-interested action confers benefits on others.

The bigger issue is that it's incomplete. It can't be the whole story. Christian faith tells us that humans are fallen and prone to sin, albeit not irredeemably bad. We are created in the image of God. The essence of the moral struggle is that we are capable of good as well as evil.

The narrow economic account reassures us that human frailty (or self-interest) can be beneficial for others. But it doesn't leave or create much room for goodness, if we regard goodness as requiring a degree of intentional moral virtue.

If we think only of the invisible hand in its purest form, we cut off what theologians or God might actually want for us—a path of moral improvement. In my view, the Christian critique should focus less on the workings of the market, and more on encouraging a richer underlying anthropology of personal choice.

For the economist's part, it would pay to return to Adam Smith. Smith was not a believer in narrow homo economicus. He saw human motivation as driven by self-regard, not selfishness as such. Self-regard includes a concern for reputation. We learn morality in part because we care what others think of us.

Smith famously says that we don't just wish to be loved. We wish to be lovely. That is, over time, we internalise that sense of approval or reproach. We act as though judged by an Impartial Spectator. In the end, we even prefer the approval of that internal spectator to the applause of the crowd.

Smith's psychology is naturalistic and secular, but it gets much closer to the Christian moral conscience—the divided heart, conflicted between altruistic and selfish urges.

It is not a divine voice; nor is it Kantian pure reason. It is an emergent moral faculty, which is honed and developed over time, through interaction, introspection, and even instruction.

Smith was a realist. He knew that human sympathy is inevitably partial—we care more about those close to us than those remote. For impersonal interactions, like commercial dealings, the spectator asks that we act justly—free of fraud, violence and coercion. But we don't need to internalise the wishes of other parties, which we can never fully know in any event. It's enough to know there is a mutual gain from our dealings. But in personal domains, the spectator pushes us actively to virtues like generosity, kindness and gratitude.

It was this, much richer, account of human motivation that inspired HG Brennan over much of his later career. One of his most important books is perhaps one of his less celebrated. He wrote it with Alan Hamlin, and it's called *Democratic Devices and Desires*. It is noteworthy that 'Devices and Desires' is a reference to the words of the Confession in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer – 'we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts'.

For Brennan and Hamlin, the rational individual did not necessarily maximise utility at every single moment. They chose and developed dispositions—rules and regularities of behaviour—including a disposition to act morally as well as the tendency to increase one's own consumption.

Those dispositions could compete within the human heart (my term not theirs). So there was some reflection of the inner struggle. They could also evolve over time.

Having the right dispositions might be beneficial. If I have a reputation for keeping promises, people are more likely to trust and do business with me. But for Brennan and Hamlin, that tendency, although real, is not the main point.

For them, dispositions are not primarily driven by commercial self-interest. They are more like Smith's account of emergent moral conscience. They bring in a richer reflection of motivation, arguably a bit closer to the Christian view. Humanity is imperfect, fallen, often self-interested, but still capable of virtue, which can grow and develop over time. Dispositions evolve.

If humans have some limited amount of virtue, as well as a liberal dose of self-interest, then we will inevitably rely heavily on the invisible hand to generate positive social outcomes. But we will also need something more.

"Smith's psychology is naturalistic and secular, but it gets much closer to the Christian moral conscience—the divided heart, conflicted between altruistic and selfish urges."

The invisible hand, via the sophisticated institutions of markets, gives us a mechanism to channel self-interest into beneficial outcomes for others. But we also have to work out mechanisms that put that scarce stock of virtue to good use. What are the rules, norms, and institutions that could magnify or multiply that precious thing? We have to use it wisely.

A pivotal chapter in that Brennan and Hamlin's book is titled 'Economising on Virtue'. It is the authors' attempt to set out what they see as a central task in designing, supporting and reforming institutions. The chapter starts with an epigraph which is a quote from James Madison in Federalist Paper 57

"The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust."

That implies that virtue is scarce. It resides more in some people than others. But even in the very best, it can erode. As Lord Acton noted, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The key question is: How do we maximise the benefits from the meagre ration of virtue we actually have, and how might we build on it incrementally?

As economists, Brennan and Hamlin see a role for prices. If we want to encourage the formation and exercise of virtuous dispositions, we need to lower the cost of acting on them, relative to other urges.

One example they develop is voting, particularly for redistributive policies. Giving away money is costly for any individual. Voting for redistribution is less costly because the individual voter does not really determine the election outcome—their vote is not decisive. So the precise act of voting for a policy is in fact almost costless for an individual, even if the policy (should it be enacted) would have significant implications for their income or wealth.

But voting gives them an outlet for 'expressive utility'—the chance to reflect a virtuous disposition, to be a certain type of person. Perhaps this disposition is purely internal—like appealing to the impartial spectator (given voting occurs via secret ballot).

That expressive disposition, that motivation, can be very real. It might explain why people vote for income transfers that they would not themselves voluntarily pay. The cost of that expressive act is much lower at the polling booth than in the marketplace.

The Christian and theologian may well approve of that voting tendency. The fine print is that it is still a (pared back) version of the invisible hand at work. The vote is surely less virtuous than private giving. But, like the invisible hand, this particular exercise of low-cost virtue by enough people can result in quite large payments to low-income households.

I should emphasise that Brennan, elsewhere, conceded that voting could also lower the cost of more malevolent or anti-social motives. Voters can also simply cast their ballot for policies that enrich themselves.

But it points to the possibility that democratic processes could produce and cultivate at least some norms that prod us in a more virtuous direction, using scarce virtue, as much as self-interest, in an invisible hand like way.

In some ways, this work was a precursor to Brennan's book with Philip Pettit, *The Economy of Esteem.* That book was even more squarely in the tradition of Adam Smith, looking deeply at the implications of our tendency to value reputation, possibly as much as material things.

This motivation can be harnessed judiciously. It can also be crowded out. It might be that teachers do not respond to performance pay or annual bonuses, in the way some economists expect. But maybe they do respond to the professional respect of their peers. Can we harness that? Can the right mechanisms give teachers strong incentives to be their best, in return for professional esteem? If so, we might need to be careful about imposing economic incentives that crowd out those other incentives that operate via professional norms.

Do we get more donations for the hospital if we give the donor a plaque? Probably. There must be a reason we have plaques. There is a trade going on—monetary donation in return for reputational enhancement. And something like an invisible hand is at work here too: a bit of generosity and a dose of self-interest generating a socially desirable outcome.

From a Christian standpoint, that probably makes the donation less morally virtuous. Surely anonymous giving would be more worthy. But if we didn't allow plaques, and got fewer donations, would that be a better outcome?

"We have to think about one logical corollary: we would need to worry about the excessive love of all these other motives too—reputation, moral righteousness, pride and vanity."

Christian theologians are often hostile to markets. However, once economists broaden their view of human motivation—including esteem, altruism, and a disposition to virtue—we also broaden the range of social interactions that can be considered to be occurring in markets, of a sort.

Charitable giving, voluntary work, professional pride, decisions made by government officials, election promises—these are all shaped by incentives, appealing to some version of self-interest (broadly conceived). They all occur in settings that can be characterised as a market, albeit with different rules and norms to those governing the market for oranges.

Of course, if we broaden the domain of self-interest, and the range of personal motivations that can be harnessed to produce social outcomes, we have to think about one logical corollary. In the same way that Christian theology warns against the love of money, we would need to worry about the excessive love of all these other motives too—reputation, moral righteousness, pride and vanity.

Equally, if we reject the role and use of incentives altogether, then we throw out not just market capitalism, but all manner of institutions developed over time to tame, and work within the constraints of self-interest and human frailty and harness the mixed motives of people in all sorts of interactions.

The Madisonian checks and balances referred to by Brennan and Hamlin were designed to encourage some moral virtue in our rulers, even if they will never be saints. It is why we elect governments on a broad franchise subject to constitutional

limits. It is why we create independent entities to take on sensitive roles like the conduct of monetary policy, or operational policing decisions. It is why we enforce contracts, protect property, and outlaw predation and confiscation. It is why we enact welfare policies based on objective rules and clear entitlements, not the discretion of government officials. It sits behind the intricate rules of all sorts of public and private institutions. Often in ways that evolved gradually and which we do not fully understand.

The notion of human frailty—the human capacity for both good and evil—is common to Christianity and to the economic way of thinking. And it sits behind the long development of norms and institutions which, in many ways, are our liberal democratic inheritance.

They did not arise from a single vision of the good society. They emerged slowly, unevenly, often painfully, as our forebears learned—through failure as much as foresight—the dangers of unchecked power, the fragility of cooperation and the unreliability of moral heroism.

The approach I have tried to describe here is explicitly not utilitarian. Nor is it about comparing different states of the world and asking which is better in some aggregate sense, or asking which is more moral, more virtuous, more Christian. The focus is on emergent processes.

"The aim is not to pin-point a desired destination, but to ask: what are the rules, settings and institutions that best position us to expand virtue."

The aim is not to pin-point a desired destination, but to ask: what are the rules, settings and institutions that best position us to expand virtue, to make best use of it, and to soften the effect of self interest?

That is very consistent with HG Brennan's career, going back to his formative years in the Public Choice movement with James Buchanan, who absolutely and emphatically rejected the utilitarian approach.

And I encourage Christian theologians to reflect on that too. In finding fault with the world, our job is not to try and identify a different set of idealised outcomes. It is to better understand the processes by which good social outcomes, and a degree of moral improvement, can occur. That would include ministry, guidance, demonstrating love, charity and forgiveness and strengthening church communities in prayer and fellowship.

It does not, in my view, involve top-down coercion. Partly because coercion robs any act of its moral worth. Partly because coercion presupposes an enlightened and benevolent leader to stipulate the 'right' outcome, chart the course and do the coercing. Leaders, after all, will be imperfect and morally frail. More so if we attract those with an innate preference for coercing others.

The idea of human imperfection is not consciously central to much of what economists or theologians have to say. However, sometimes this truth is forgotten or glossed over. Why might that be?

Economists don't easily forget self-interest. But we can ignore other forms of human weakness in the quest for explanatory power and modelling parsimony. We have a tendency to use assumptions of hyper-rationality: where people have stable, well-defined preferences plus perfect information and foresight.

It might be just an allegory—a simplifying assumption for analytic purposes, but if we are incautious it can lead to over-confidence about optimal solutions.

Many defences of the market, as well as many accounts of market failure (and associated arguments for government intervention), rest on those somewhat stylised models.

For their part, Christian theologians perhaps worry that a focus on imperfection could excuse sin or erode moral aspiration. There has always been a complex interplay between moral striving and God's grace.

It's as though both economists and Christians in their own way long to break free of the human condition—to render the world neat, and to render it redeemed.

That is understandable, but not without its dangers, dangers which to some extent are playing out before us, in the modern equivalent of Matthew Arnold's confused alarms of struggle and flight, and his ignorant armies clashing by night.

The institutions that are our liberal democratic inheritance are globally under some threat. Moreover, it is an inheritance which surprisingly few feel disposed to defend in the face of violent rebellions against that central notion of achieving order from imperfection.

I see three main forms of rebellion against the liberal democratic institutional inheritance.

Each is stylised—a caricature of a mindset that lies behind some of what we observe around us.

The first is technocracy, where we put our faith in the experts and hope to optimise our way to happiness or salvation. This

HG Brennan workshop participants

view assumes that the complex social issues we confront all have a scientific solution, and those solutions all harmonise with one another. It assumes that trade-offs between divergent interests can be reconciled via social optimisation. It also treats disagreement or divergent belief as a form of error.

The second is moral utopianism—the idea that if we aspire hard enough to righteousness and purity, we can achieve perfect justice. It denies moral ambiguity, comes down hard on perceived failure and tends to justify coercion.

The third is cynical nihilism—the idea that humans are so selfish and corrupt that moral aspiration is meaningless. No one is better than anyone else. Moral effort is hypocrisy. It's all about power. This perspective mistakes moral difficulty for moral impossibility.

These three stylised types are not really opposites. They are three ways of refusing to live with human imperfection and rebelling against it.

But none of them is sustainable. When we run from human imperfection, it comes back bigger. None of these three escape routes works, something that can give rise to a fourth pathology—the mad oscillation between all three.

So the loss of faith in experts turns into moral utopianism—if we drain the swamp, get rid of the bad people and put in the good ones, then we will be redeemed. Nihilism seeks to replace experts with a strongman.

We see those who express complete cynicism of human interaction via markets but advocate (coercive) political programs as vehicles of moral redemption. We see the cynicism about gradual processes under established institutions translate to credulous belief in an alternative moral utopia. We see the erstwhile champions of tolerance embracing censorship and cancellation, accompanied by a general addiction to outrage when others fall short of perfection.

Such is the moral whiplash of our times.

These oscillating viewpoints are symptoms of moral impatience and a refusal to come back to the starting point of human weakness. They arise when we cannot bear the slow, frustrating work of improvement among imperfect people.

I believe economics and Christianity, properly conceived, reject all this and provide something of an antidote to it. Once we accept and live with moral humility and imperfect knowledge, disappointment gives way to measured optimism.

"Economics teaches us that successful social order can rest on mixed individual motives… Christianity teaches us something parallel."

Economics teaches us that successful social order can rest on mixed individual motives. Cooperation can emerge through rules, prices, and institutions that work even when people are ordinary, imperfect, and a complex mix of self-interest and virtue.

Christianity teaches us something parallel. It does not promise moral completion in this life. It offers instead a process of formation—sustained by practices, communities, forgiveness, and grace. It makes moral improvement possible without demanding moral heroism.

Humans are flawed, but also good. Over time we have found—from the bottom up— ingenious systems to channel self-interest and limited virtue toward positive ends. We discard them at our peril.

Idealised outcomes are elusive, while incremental improvement can work. We should not promise perfection in this life. But we should also certainly refuse despair.

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Public Lecture

Doug Hynd,
The Sunburnt Soul Revisited

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Lifeline Open Book Forum

Candid conversations on the US mid term elections

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Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network Forum

Bearing Witness: Palestinian Christian Voices from the Holy Land

August

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Strings in Spring recital

cellists Rachel Scott and David Periera

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Book Launch

Frank Brennan,
The Speeches of Sir William Deane

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Australian Network for Spiritual Direction Quiet Day

September

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Strings in Spring recital

Alice Gyles
– harp

Arnan Wiesel
– piano

Chris Latham
– violin

David Pereira
– cello

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The Australian Voices Ensemble

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Strings in Spring recital

Dr Edward Neeman
– piano

David Periera
– cello

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Lifeline Open Book Forum

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Public Lecture

Gospel Values and the Weaponisation of Christianity

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Australian Network for Spiritual Direction Quiet Day

See the **Events** on our website for more information on upcoming events and subscribe to our newsletter to receive invitations and reminders.

Bible Garden, photo by Liz Jakimow