





St Mark's  
**Review**

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**No. 231, April 2015 (1)**

# St Mark's remembers



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# Editorial

In the last thirty years Australians have witnessed a remarkable resurgence of participation and interest in Anzac commemoration. The Anzac 'legend' (or 'myth') and its commemoration has expanded in the national psyche, with Anzac Day eclipsing Australia Day as Australia's most important national day. Historian Alistair Thomson observes that this has been nurtured by a blossoming Australian nationalism, guided by political leaders, but rooted in popular cultural representations of Australian history.

There is little doubt that the Gallipoli campaign, in which 8,000 young Australians lost their lives and many more were wounded, produced acts of bravery, sacrifice and mateship that are worthy of commemoration. Yet these historical events also produced a powerful and widely accepted legend that the events at Gallipoli somehow forged a nation, representing Australia's 'baptism of fire' and its 'spiritual birth' as a nation, and enshrining the character qualities of Anzac soldiers (such as mateship, self-sacrifice, courage and initiative) in the national character.

Like any act of commemoration, however, the history and significance of Anzac is contested. In the context of larger debates about Australian national identity, several Australian historians and thinkers have questioned the notion that Gallipoli or the Great War represent the birth of the nation as opposed to the Federation of Australia in 1901. Some have observed the marginalization of Australia's women and indigenous peoples from this founding narrative, while others have expressed concern that the Anzac legend has been co-opted by governments to promote social cohesion or involvement in overseas wars, or exploited by crass commercial interest (such as Woolworths supermarkets' disastrous Anzac advertising campaign in April 2015), or that a celebratory and conservative tone—rather than an honestly critical one—looks set to be the dominant mood of the commemoration of the centenary of Gallipoli and the Great War.

Exactly fifty years ago, in a landmark article in this journal, historian Ken Inglis articulated another key question regarding Anzac Day commemoration—that of its religious dimensions. In the article, which was based on an address given at St Mark's Library on 14 October 1965, Inglis quoted one Second World War veteran's comment on Anzac Day commemoration that year:

A trend ... is becoming increasingly evident in the RSL [Returned Servicemen's League] ... to dechristianize Anzac celebrations and to replace worship of God alone with a new reverence for the spirit of our departed comrades. If this trend continues, a new religion of ancestor-worship could develop, complete with ritual, songs of which are already in evidence in at some gatherings.<sup>1</sup>

Such striking observations, coupled with Inglis's study of Australian war memorials, led him to ponder how this came about, and 'how, after the war,' the 'guardians of Anzac [got] on with the leaders of the Christian religion to which 90 per cent of Australians profess[ed] allegiance.'<sup>2</sup> Today that profession of allegiance has of course changed: the 2011 census reveals that that figure of 90 per cent has now lowered to 63 per cent. Yet, fifty years on, historians like Mark McKenna are still seeking to 'understand why 25 April has become holier than 25 December in the Australian calendar.'<sup>3</sup> Broader questions about the complex relationship between war, memory and religion remain pertinent.

That century-long relationship between those Inglis describes as the 'guardians of Anzac' and the 'leaders of the Christian religion' is the focus of this special edition of *St Mark's Review*. The following articles and reflections explore several questions concerning what Australian Christians might make of Christianity, Anzac Day and the Anzac legend a century after Australians landed at Gallipoli. Does Anzac commemoration constitute, for example, a civil or secular religion, as some Australian thinkers have suggested? And if so, how might this civil/secular religion relate to the far older Christian religion that has historically underpinned Australian society? What place should Anzac or war have in Australia's social imaginary and national identity? How might Christians commemorate Anzac Day (or war in general) rightly and wisely?

This edition is divided into two sections. The first section is a series of reflections on war and Anzac Day from a theological perspective—from two Australian theologians and two senior Australian Army chaplains. The second set of articles approach the issues from a historical perspective. After all, as Andrew Cameron points out in his meditation on war and memory, it is the historian ‘whose professional arts of remembrance discipline us to close attention and rigorous care.’

Several themes emerge in this rich repast of scholarly reflection: a more pervasive and influential Christian dimension to Anzac Day commemoration than some secular commentators have suggested; various ways in which popular and scholarly representations of Anzac, including those of filmmakers and historians, have sidelined or sidestepped its religious origins and character; the complex interaction of civil religion, religion and spirituality in both Anzac Day and the Anzac legend; and the extent to which Anzac Day commemoration reflects a personal and national quest among Australians for national identity and a sense of the transcendent, in the context of an increasingly multicultural and religiously pluralist society.

Tertullian (c.160–c.220), one of the first Christian intellectuals to ponder the relationship between Christianity and prevailing notions of war, famously asked what Athens (representing Greek philosophy) had to do with Jerusalem (representing Christian revelation). Given that classical Greek and Christian motifs are juxtaposed in the many memorials and imaginings that dot Australia’s physical and cultural landscape, Australians today might well ask a similar question: ‘What has Gallipoli to do with Jerusalem?’ A task for theologians, historians, chaplains and thoughtful Christians is to retell these connections to a society that has forgotten so many of its founding spiritual narratives.

## Endnotes

1. KS Inglis, ‘Anzac and Christian—Two Traditions or One?’, *St Mark’s Review*, No. 42, November 1965, pp. 3–12, at p. 12.
2. KS Inglis, ‘The Anzac Tradition’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1965, pp. 25–54, at p. 44.
3. Mark McKenna, ‘Anzac Day: How did it become Australia’s national day?’, in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (eds), *What’s Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, p. 112.