FEW numismatists today collect religious medals. This is sad because some of them are beautifully designed and quite inspirational. It is a large area and includes papal medals, i.e. medals officially issued by the Vatican. Because of the increasing secularization of Australian society there is not much interest in religious medals now and they are usually sold (if at all) as large group lots in auctions. For religious people, however, they can be a source of encouragement and a reminder of some important event or saintly person who is now largely forgotten.

There are thousands of religious medals and only a few will be discussed here. Probably the most well-known is the Saint Christopher Medal. \(\text{Figure 1}\) He is the patron saint of travellers and motorists, and many Australians (including...
me) have a Saint Christopher Medal in their cars. Actually nothing is known about him except that he might have been a Christian martyred in the third century. In the Middle Ages, because his name means “Christ bearer”, a delightful story developed about him. He was a large man and because his Christian faith motivated him to help others a hermit told him to live near a river and help travellers to cross it. One day a child asked Christopher to carry him across, but when he entered the water the child became immensely heavy. It was then that the child revealed himself to be Christ. He said that Christopher was carrying the weight of the whole world because the person he was carrying created the world and holds the world in his hand. When Christopher reached the other side of the river he was told to plant his staff in the ground and next day it would bear flowers as a positive sign for the world.

Non-religious people would no doubt accuse people who have a Saint Christopher Medal in their car of being foolish and superstitious, but the medal can remind religious people to be positive and alert and confident that the world is indeed in God’s hands. Non-religious people, of course, do not believe that God exists, but for people who have the “God gene” this is taken for granted. Belief in God is part of their genetic make-up just as the colour of their eyes. Studies with identical twins who were separated at birth and brought up in different environments showed that if one twin was religious the other was too. Scientifically this interest in religion is attributed to the God gene, but theologically it is called “election”. For those who have it the God gene is the key to a different way of experiencing life.

So religious people should be positive and acknowledge that there are aspects of existence that they may not be aware of. As Shakespeare wrote, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” In keeping with this way of thinking there are medals with angels on them. (Figure 2) Most people laugh at the idea of angels but many religious people (including me) believe in them as divine agents who can be involved in their lives. Angels are mentioned many times in the Bible; for example, when the prophet Elijah was afraid he said, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under a tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” (1 Kings 19:5) If it is part of God’s purpose, angels will “touch” religious people in order to influence the direction of their lives. Angels can, of course, be just ordinary people who play a divine role at a particular time in someone’s life, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews explains, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) One of my favourite angel medals has an angel on one side and on the other there is just a feather with the words, “Protected by angels. Surrounded by love.” (Figure 3) So if you ever come across a single feather, watch out because you might be “touched” by an angel.

Roman Catholics believe that they can pray to saints in heaven and ask them to intercede with God for them. In this regard there are saints for various professions and walks of life. Some of these saints are well known and appear frequently on medals. They can be biblical characters like St Joseph, who is the patron saint of workers. A delightful little medal shows him working in his carpentry shop with the child Jesus who is also working. (Figure 4) Most of the saints who appear on religious medals are people who have led exemplary Christian lives, some fairly recently like Mary MacKillop. (Figure 5) I like to collect the medals of really obscure saints such as St Anastasius, the Persian. (Figure 6) He was a soldier in the Sasanian army when it captured Jerusalem in 614. While stationed in the city he converted to Christianity and subsequently went to Caesarea to preach the gospel to the Sasanian soldiers there. He was arrested and tortured, but he refused to renounce his faith. He was then taken in chains to the Euphrates River where he was again tortured and eventually strangled.

St Jude (Figure 7) is a saint who is so obscure that no one is sure who he was. He is the patron of hopeless causes, and according to David Farmer, the author of The Oxford Dictionary of Saints, “This

Figure 3 – A white-metal medal, 30 mms in diameter, with an angel on one side and a feather on the other.

Figure 4 – An aluminium medal, 22 mms in diameter. It shows Joseph and Jesus doing carpentry. The words on the reverse are: St Joseph the worker, pray for us.

Figure 5 – Bronze medal, 27 mms in diameter, issued to commemorate the beatification of Mary MacKillop in 1995. She was canonized (made a saint) in 2010.

Figure 6 – Bronze medal, 22 mms wide, showing the head of St Anastasius the Persian. There is a cross on the reverse.
patronage is said to have originated because nobody invoked him for anything since his name so closely resembled that of Judas who betrayed the Lord; consequently he favours even the most desperate situations of his clients.” Surprisingly David Farmer confirmed that in many cases their prayers were answered. Perhaps by acknowledging that they needed help they did not depend solely on their own psychological resources. The calming effect of giving up their troubles to a higher power enabled their desperate situations to be sorted out with time. They got their God gene working for them and stayed cool, calm and collected.

Many religious medals show events in the life of Jesus. The Australian medallist, Andor Meszaros, made 14 medals representing the Stations of the Cross. His son Michael, also a renowned medalist, considered them to be his father’s “magnum opus.” They are illustrated with explanations in Volume 22 of the *Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia*. Michael wrote that his father was not religious in the church-going sense, but if one looks carefully at the medals they reveal the mind of a deeply religious man. In the medal showing the Crucifixion (Figure 8) we see three men doing the work and they presumably represent the evil forces in human nature. It is an unusual depiction of the Crucifixion because Jesus is not the central figure: it is the man with the hammer who is superimposed over Christ and is symbolically crucifying himself!

Michael explained that the first of these medals to be struck was the last in the traditional Stations series: the Burial. (Figure 9) He considered it to be his father’s greatest single medallic work. It captures the essence of profound grief. The veiled figures in low relief give the scene a mystical quality, and the movement is from the distraught naked person on the right to a veiled figure who has collapsed on the left but holds up hands symbolizing, just faintly, the hope of Resurrection. A man who commissioned Andor Meszaros to make a statue for the grave of his young son told him that he would not have survived the grief without this medal.

Some religious medals refer to events...
in the life of a Christian. Although it is uncommon today some denominations issued medals to commemorate a person’s baptism (Figure 10) and their first Communion. “Communion” refers to the Christian partaking of the Lord’s Supper, i.e. when Jesus offered bread and wine to his disciples and said that they were his body and blood. It is really important in the life of a Christian, and some of the First Communion Medals are very beautiful. (Figure 11)

Sunday school medals are a large area in numismatics with many interesting examples. Some are very impressive, like the one in Figure 12. It is 51 mms in diameter and is in a red case with the words, GEORGE SIMPSON 1905, in gold letters on the case. It shows children being brought to Jesus while his disciples stand on the right. It illustrates an incident recorded in Matthew’s Gospel:

*Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:13,14)*

As stated on the reverse of George’s medal it was given for one year’s perfect attendance, home lessons and conduct. It was awarded by All Saints Sunday Schools, Clapham Park, London. It is sad to think that about ten years after receiving this medal there is a strong chance that George was killed in World War I. Having learnt the teaching of Jesus, as the medal testifies, he was probably one of those many soldiers on both sides who could not kill anybody and just fired their rifles into the air. Dave Grossman in his book, *On Killing* (New York: Little, Brown

Figure 11 – Gold and mother-of-pearl First Communion Medal, 39 mms in length, showing a circular piece of bread above a chalice. On the bread the letters IHS stand for “Jesus.” At the side of the chalice are an ear of wheat and a bunch of grapes (to indicate wine in the chalice). The reverse is blank.
& Co., 2009) explains that this was fairly common behaviour. Referring to battle conditions he wrote, “The simple fact is that when faced with a living, breathing opponent instead of a target, a significant majority of the soldiers revert to a posturing mode in which they fire over their enemy's heads.” He quoted a British officer in World War I who said that the only way he could stop his men firing into the air was to hit them on the backside with his sword and order them to fire low.

A number of religious medals refer to Christian mission. An interesting medal honours the eight Canadian martyrs who died in the period from 1642 to 1649. (Figure 13) They were members of the Society of Jesus (S.J.) and they tried to convert the indigenous people of what is now eastern Canada and north-eastern USA. Actually it would be more accurate to call them the North American martyrs. Unfortunately when Europeans made contact with the natives they introduced diseases such as smallpox, and the natives began to see them as evil. The missionaries were thought to be malevolent shamans and they were often horribly tortured before being killed. On the medal these saintly men hold palm branches to symbolize their victory over death.

Protestants have also produced medals referring to missionaries. A medal issued by the Church Missionary Society in 1899 to celebrate their 100th anniversary shows a missionary preaching to a group of men who represent the various races of the world. He holds an open Bible in his left hand in keeping with the Protestant emphasis on the Bible. (Figure 14) The London Missionary Society, which was founded in 1795, issued a large medal in 1844 to honour John Williams, who was a missionary martyred at Eromanga in Vanuatu in 1839. (Figure 15) The medal shows the ship that was named after him. It was bought by the London missionary Society to convey missionaries to the islands of the South Pacific. These medals remind us that Christianity spread to various countries in the world at great cost to some of those involved in its spread. In China today Christianity is flourishing but many Christians suffered and many died to bring the gospel to China. In Australia, although religious medals are considered old-fashioned and irrelevant and attendances at churches are falling, it should not be forgotten that this nation was founded on a Christian base and that is why we have our way of life today.

Obviously if a person is devoid of religious feeling religious medals will be of no interest whatsoever. A religious person is someone who is in awe at the great mystery of human existence, of just being alive. Rudolf Otto, a German theologian, called this the Mysterium Tremendum and believed that God was integral to that “tremendousness” in which we exist. Aware of this phenomenon religious people are sensitive to intuition of a spiritual nature. In other words they feel that the Holy Spirit is active in the world and in them.

Everyone needs a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and ultimately this is what religion is all about: the quest to find meaning. With this quest comes hope, and with hope comes strength and the power to overcome. Religious medals, like all religious art, can contribute to this empowerment.

Note: The medals shown in this article are from the author's collection.