



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF  
CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SOCIETIES

# Religious Change and Indigenous Populations in the Antipodes

Tuesday 13 March, 2012 from 1:00 PM–4:00 PM

University of Western Sydney

Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies

Parramatta campus, Building EZ



This symposium explores some of the religious and spiritual changes which have been taking place among Indigenous populations in Australia, New Zealand and some Pacific Islands. It focuses on changes in religious affiliation over the last 15 years. The analytical focus draws on both local social and political debates on these matters, while contextualising the discussion in a wider global discourse on changing religious affiliation, especially the growth of Islam.

Event is free of charge and all are welcome.

For catering purposes, please RSVP to  
[e.garcia@uws.edu.au](mailto:e.garcia@uws.edu.au) by Friday 9 March.

# Program

13:00	Welcome
13:10	Symposium Opening Prof. Tim Rowse, University of Western Sydney
13:20	A/Prof. Adam Possamai, University of Western Sydney: 'Religious Profile of Aborigines, Pacific Peoples and Maoris in Australia and New Zealand: An analysis of the 2001 and 2006 censuses'
13:50	Prof. James L Cox, The University of Edinburgh: 'The Invention of God amongst Australian Aboriginal Societies: The Case of the 'Rainbow Spirit Theology'
14:20	Afternoon Tea
2:40	Dr Dominic O'Sullivan, Charles Sturt University: 'Reconciliation: religion in comparative indigenous politics'
3:10	Dr Helena Onnudottir, University of Western Sydney: 'Elementary and ageless or lost in the course of history? A reflection on non-Indigenous articulation of Indigenous spirituality and religions and the nature of Aboriginality'
3:40	Plenary Discussion
4:00	End

## Symposium Speakers and Abstracts

### Professor Tim Rowse

Prof. Tim Rowse is a Professorial Fellow in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts and in the Institute for Culture and Society at UWS.

Although much of what he writes can best be described as History, Tim's formal training has been in Government, Sociology and Anthropology. He has taught at Macquarie University, the Australian National University and Harvard University (where he held the Australian Studies chair in 2003-4), and he has held research appointments at the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, the University of Queensland and the ANU. Since the early 1980s, his research has focused on the relationships between Indigenous and other Australians, in Central Australia (where he lived from 1989 to 1996) and in the national political sphere. In the 1990s, this and other interests led him to write two books about the life and works of Dr. H.C. Coombs.

Prof. Rowse is a Member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, a Fellow of both the Australian Academy of Humanities and the Australian Social Science Academy.

### **Religious Profile of Aborigines, Pacific Peoples and Maoris in Australia and NZ. An analysis of the 2001 and 2006 censuses**

A/Prof Adam Possamai, University of Western Sydney

The current literature remains silent on the various religious changes and conversion happening among the indigenous population. Using the data obtained from the 2001 and 2006 censuses from Australia and New Zealand, this paper analyses the religious affiliations of Aborigines, Pacific Peoples and Maoris. Among other things, it points out the decline in Christianity and growth in Islam, which is in line with current religious trends in the general population. However, with regards to the 'no religion' category, the growth of indigenous people is faster than that of the non-indigenous population.

Adam Possamai is Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Western Sydney and the acting Director of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies. He is the President of the Sociology of Religion Research Committee from the International Sociological Association.

## The Invention of God amongst Australian Aboriginal Societies: The Case of the ‘Rainbow Spirit Theology’

James L Cox, The University of Edinburgh

This paper provides a critique of how Christian theologians have interpreted Indigenous Religions in Australia by considering the case of ‘The Rainbow Spirit Theology’, which originated in the 1980s in north Queensland. Such theological interpretations have been created in response to prior evolutionary interpretations, suggested by late nineteenth century scholars of indigenous societies such as E.B. Tylor and Baldwin Spencer, who depicted Aboriginal peoples as lowest on the scale of human development. The Rainbow Spirit Elders, in conjunction with the Lutheran theologian Norman Habel, have sought to integrate Christian teaching into ideas found in Aboriginal spirituality by suggesting that the ‘rainbow spirit’ represents an ancient symbol of the Creator God. Research suggests that such an endeavour to locate the Christian God amongst indigenous Australian societies is a theological invention. The question for scholars of religion raised by the Rainbow Spirit Theology is an ethical rather than an empirical one. Can we justify non-contextualised Christian interpretations of a postulated belief in God amongst Aboriginal societies on the grounds that theologians are attempting to instil in indigenous peoples pride in their own traditions after suffering so many years of denigration both by academics and colonial authorities?

**James Cox** is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh. He has held prior academic posts at the University of Zimbabwe, Westminster College, Oxford and Alaska Pacific University. His most recent monographs include: *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Continuum, 2010), *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Ashgate, 2007) and *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Continuum, 2006).

## Reconciliation: religion in comparative indigenous politics

Dr Dominic O’Sullivan, Charles Sturt University

Reconciliation is a political/theological nexus that influences indigenous policy across Australia, Fiji and New Zealand in equally significant but markedly different ways. For the state, reconciliation is a political objective intended to achieve social cohesion and political stability, but for the Church it extends the sacramental notion of reconciliation between God and penitent to human relationships ordered towards the correction of injustice. The paper explores how these different perspectives are played out as politics of indigeneity in jurisdictions with marked differences in how they approach questions of religion and politics and with different conceptions of indigeneity and its relationship to human dignity and justice.

**Dr Dominic O’Sullivan** is a senior lecturer in political science at Charles Sturt University. His research interests transcend political science, education and public theology with indigeneity providing a unifying scholarly theme. He has published three books in these fields, including: *Scaling-up Education Reform: addressing the politics of disparity* (with Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman) (NZCER Press, 2010), *Beyond Biculturalism: the politics of an indigenous minority* (Huia Publishers 2007) and *Faith politics and reconciliation: Catholicism and the politics of indigeneity* (The Australian Theological Forum, 2005).

## Elementary and ageless or lost in the course of history? A reflection on non-Indigenous articulation of Indigenous spirituality and religions and the nature of Aboriginality.

Dr Helena Onnudottir, University of Western Sydney

In this paper I wish to explore two persistent, but opposing, perceptions of Indigenous spirituality and religions in Australia; the positive romanticised image of the primitive, or noble, savage – particularly evident in Dreamtime imaginary during the Sydney Olympics in 2000 - and the negative image, depicting an inauthentic Aborigine who has lost tradition, culture and history. Essentialist constructs of the cultural and spiritual aspects of Indigenous populations in Australia have been made by non-Indigenous people from the earliest stages of British colonisation, but political, social and economic objectives have brought these representations to the fore of public discourse over the past 30 years (e.g. in the contexts of land/native title claims and Reconciliation). During that same timeframe, the voices of Indigenous people (scholars, artists, activists, etc.) have gained momentum, increasingly providing their own understanding and accounts of their spiritual identities and religious practices. My particular focus will be on those parts of Australia which have been long settled by white Australians (esp. New South Wales), currently ‘home’ to the majority of Australia’s Indigenous population. My conceptual focus will be on exploring the concepts of ‘Aboriginality’ (claims to culture and spiritual identity), ‘Belonging’ (to place, kin and ancestors) and the articulation of these with a particular notion of ‘authentic’ Aboriginality.

**Helena Onnudottir** is a social anthropologist and a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at University of Western Sydney. Her broad research areas include Aboriginal Australia, Multiculturalism, Religion, Gender and Sexuality, and current research focuses on changes to religious identification, images and practices among Aboriginal people in urban settings.