

## Religion and Non- Religion among Australian Aboriginal Peoples

### Roundtable Discussion

In the 2011 census, approximately 24% of the total Indigenous population claimed to have no religion. Between the 2006 and 2011 census, this represented close to a 41% increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who selected the No Religion category. When compared to the 29.41% increase in this same category among the Australian population as a whole, the difference was enough to prompt scholars to ask why. This roundtable discussion explores the significance of and possible explanations for these statistics. Is it that the Indigenous population, along with the wider Australian society, is in fact becoming increasingly secularised? Eight presenters from across a number of disciplines provide insights based on their research into the issue.

#### Date and Time

Wednesday, 27 August 2014  
10.00 am – 13.00 pm

#### Venue

Bankstown Campus  
Building 23, Room G.41

#### RSVP

By Friday, 22 August 2014 (for catering purposes)  
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## Speakers

Jim Cox, University of Edinburgh

Steve Bevis, University of Sydney

Kevin Dunn, University of Western Sydney

Helen Onnudottir, University of Western Sydney

Awais Piracha, University of Western Sydney

Alan Nixon, University of Western Sydney

David Moore, University of Western Australia

Hart Cohen, University of Western Sydney

## The Study of 'Non-Religion' and Indigenous Societies

**James Cox, University of Edinburgh**

This paper introduces the study of 'non-religion' as a growing field within the academic study of religions and suggests that thus far the concentration of 'non-religion studies' has focused on Western contexts. It provides the results of fieldwork in September and October 2013 among Aboriginal people in two different contexts. The first consisted of individual and group interviews in the urban setting of Mount Druitt, a suburb of Western Sydney. The other was comprised of interviews that took place in Ampilatwja, a settlement located around 325 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The concepts 'religion' and 'non-religion' will be discussed in light of the interview findings with implications for how 'non-religion' among Australian Aboriginal groups is understood by the people themselves.

## Urban-Rural Geographies of Aboriginal Religious and Non-Religious Identification

**Kevin Dunn, Helen Onnudottir and Awais Piracha, University of Western Sydney**

In the past forty years Australia has been transforming from an overwhelmingly Christian country to one that is non-religious. If the current trends continue, by 2050 one in two Australians will be non-religious, while only one in three will be a Christian. The Australian Indigenous population has been closely following the broad Australian journey to non-religion. In recent times the Indigenous people have even surpassed, albeit by a small margin, the broader Australian trend.

While the overall religious drift for the Indigenous population resembles the broader trend, their geographies and motivations are not always the same. This presentation maps indigenous demographics of religion from the three census periods of 1996 to 2011. It then carries out an in-depth analysis of geographies of Indigenous non-religion. With the aid of existing literature on Indigenous religions, it will link and interpret the geographies with religious and spiritual means for the Indigenous population. An effort will also be made to understand what may be causing the Indigenous transformation through the lenses of the new "religions" of sports and performing arts as well as disillusionment in religion.

## The Online Growth of Indigenous Atheists and Connections to the 'New Atheism'

**Alan Nixon, University of Western Sydney**

There has been a growth in Indigenous Australians claiming to have 'no religion' on the Australian Census. This growth has brought into light questions about the forms of Indigenous religion and Non-religion. This has been particularly highlighted by the fact that one of the highest growth categories for atheism in the 2006 to the 2011 census was among Aboriginal atheists (126%), which was higher than for the whole of the Australian population (88%).

Although the number of Aborigines who went beyond ticking the 'no religion' answer on the census to write their specific atheist

affiliation is small (1,230), it is still higher than Muslim Aborigines (1,142) who have nevertheless attracted a great deal of media attention. The media attention given to Indigenous Muslims also brings into light the difference in societal perceptions of Atheists compared to perceptions of Muslims. The internet has provided a space for the interaction of mainstream non-religious individuals in the postmodern world. This has been particularly evident with the New Atheism which has risen at the same time as the emergence of Indigenous atheists. Using new internet research methodologies, this paper will investigate the growth of this group.

### Altjira, Dreaming and God

**David Moore, University of Western Australia**

Altjira has been defined as 'Dreaming', 'God' and 'dream' since the study of the Aranda (Arrernte) language began in the late nineteenth century. How should Altjira be translated, a century after the well-known controversies about its meaning?

The challenge for lexicographers is to define Altjira in dictionaries, recovering its original meaning and new meanings which have been acquired through the influence of Christian missions and anthropological fieldwork. This paper explores the entry for 'Altjira' in bilingual Aboriginal language to English dictionaries and wordlists which provide evidence for the past and present use of the term in remote Aboriginal societies.

### The Strehlow – Hermannsburg/Ntaria Perplex: Syncretism in a Lutheran-Aboriginal Community

**Hart Cohen, University of Western Sydney**

At the apex of the old church in the historical precinct at Hermannsburg (Ntaria) there are inscriptions in English, German and Arrarnta – the Indigenous language of the Western Arrarnta who live in this part of remote Central Australia. This nexus of languages is unique and represents the particular historical conjuncture of German Lutheran missionisation that arrived in this Indigenous community set in Anglo Australia in the late 19th Century.

The focus on language is not accidental as the key missionary, Carl Strehlow, trained at Neuendettelsau, a seminary in Southern Germany – unusual in its impact in that Strehlow favoured an emphasis on Indigenous culture and language. Like the Jesuits, Strehlow arrived at the view that translating the bible into Arrarnta would be key to successful missionisation. Successive pastors at Hermannsburg maintained this interest and in time many Aboriginal people at Hermannsburg were converted to Christianity within a syncretic model in which biblical texts were rendered into Arrarnta, despite being a language with no abstract nouns. Contemporary Western Arrarnta therefore consider themselves both Christians and Aboriginal in terms of belief systems of a spiritual kind. For example, a popular indication that Jesus had visited Ntaria is the presence of "Jesus' footprint" – an impression in a rock near the Finke River that is a post-rationale for the presence of Christianity in earlier times.

This paper asks how this Aboriginal-Christian syncretism is rationalised within local logical belief systems held by Aboriginal people. Through interviews with members of the Ntaria community, explanations for holding these apparent contradictory belief systems are interrogated. The intent is to test the thesis that Aboriginal people have transformed Lutheranism more than Lutheranism has transformed Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultural practices.

### New Songs and Old Songlines: Aboriginal Christianity and Post-Mission Australia

**Steve Bevis, University of Sydney**

This paper maps and analyses emerging conversations concerning the intersection of religion, culture, politics and identity among groups of Aboriginal Christians in Australia.

These conversations traverse the continent – as if mimicking the songlines themselves – with interlocutors spanning the vast distances from Mount Druitt in Western Sydney to remote communities like Lajamanu in the Northern Territory. This research reveals that the subjects of these collaborative endeavours are engaged in attempts to reappraise notions of continuity and difference between local place-based and kin-shaped Aboriginal religions, and the Christianity they have inherited from the missionaries. These efforts are explicitly aimed at a retrieval and revitalisation of local culture and seek a new theological dialogue with place-based spirituality and worldviews.

Recent anthropologies of Christianity, such as that by Heather McDonald, remind us that careful ethnographic and phenomenological attention needs to be paid to these recent developments in Aboriginal Christianity in a 'post-mission' context. Furthermore, it is argued that a new element of intellectual freedom is present in this process, as generations that were not shaped by the missions are now leading these conversations. These developments are taking place outside of the control of non-Indigenous Christians and outside mainstream institutional church and mission structures.

Focusing on the work of Rex Granites Japanangka, Rev. Graham Paulson and Jerry Jangala, critique, hybridisation and orthodox Christian motifs are shown to inform a dialogical encounter that is issuing in new notions of kinship-based ministry and the re-evaluation of Western notions of church.

## Biographies

**Dr Hart Cohen** is Associate Professor in Media Arts in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney. He is Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies and a member of the Institute for Culture and Society. He has directed several ARC projects in collaboration with the Strehlow Research Centre. Dr Cohen wrote and directed two documentary films: *Mr. Strehlow's Films* (SBSI 2001) selection for screening at the RAI Ethnographic film festival (2002); and *Cantata Journey* (ABC TV 2006) for Australian public television. Dr Cohen is editor-in-chief of the on-line journal, *Global Media Journal/Australian Edition*. Recent Publications include: (2013) (with Michael Cawthorn), *Digital archives and discoverability: innovating access to the Strehlow collection in Information Technology* and (with Salazar and Barkat) *Screen Media Arts: An Introduction to Concepts and Practices* (2009) Oxford University Press (Winner of the APA award best Textbook 2009).

**James L Cox** is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh. In 1999, he was appointed Reader in Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh and was awarded a Personal Chair in 2006. From 1993 to 1998, he directed the University of Edinburgh's African Christianity Project which included eight African universities in southern and western Africa. He has held prior academic posts at the University of Zimbabwe, Westminster College, Oxford and Alaska Pacific University. In 2009, he was Visiting Professor of Religion in the University of Sydney and most recently was appointed the de Carle Distinguished Lecturer for 2012 in the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. His latest monographs include: *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (Acumen, 2014), *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).

**Kevin Dunn** is Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Psychology and Professor of Human Geography and Urban Studies at the University of Western Sydney. His areas of research include the geographies of racism, immigration and settlement, Islam in Australia, and local government and multiculturalism. Recent books include *Landscapes: Ways of Imagining the World*, and his recent articles are published in *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *Race and Class*, *Ethnicities*, *The Australian Geographer*, *Studia Islamika*, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* and the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. He is a Fellow of the New South Wales Geographical Society and Vice President.

**David Moore** is Senior Linguist in the Education Department in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory of Australia. He is an accredited interpreter and translator of a range of Central Australian Aboriginal languages including Alyawarr and Arrernte. His research interests are in lexicography, translation theory and grammatical description. Recently he has investigated the category of Religion and how key terms of the category are defined in Aboriginal language dictionaries. He is currently writing his PhD dissertation at the University of Western Australia.

**Alan Nixon** is a PhD candidate at the Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. His thesis is an investigation of the emergence and evolution of the "new atheism". Alan's latest publications are "Contemporary atheism as hyper-real irreligion: The enchantment of science and atheism in *this cosmos*" in the *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (2011) and "Techno-Shamanism and the Economy of Ecstasy as a Religious Experience" in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music* (2013). Both chapters contain discussions of the non-religious. His research interests are Sociology of Religion/Irreligion, Complexity Theory, popular culture and internet research methods.

**Dr Helena Onnudottir** is a social Anthropologist and a lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology (Career Development Fellowship) at the University of Western Sydney. Special research areas include Aboriginal Australia, Indigenous spiritualities, religious and traditional changes and Aboriginal/Indigenous rights to land and culture. Current research interests include an investigation of religious changes within Aboriginal Australia. Recent publication, co-author *Religious Change and Indigenous Peoples: The Making of Religious Identities* (Ashgate, 2013).

**Awais Piracha** is Geography and Urban Studies Group Leader and Academic Course Advisor for Town Planning at the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at the University of Western Sydney. His areas of research include spatial analysis in human geography and planning, and sustainability and liveability of cities. His recent articles are published in *The Australian Planner*, *The Australian Geographer*, *Australian Journal of Structural Engineering*, *Canadian Journal of Civil Engineering*, *Local Economy*, *Global Media Journal*, and *Journal of Town and City Management*. He is a Corporate Member and a Certified Practising Planner of the Planning Institute of Australia.