Editorial: Spirit-filled Christianity and The Dreaming:
Can Australia Create Space for Theological “Makarrata”? 1, 2

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Abstract

Within this special edition of Australasian Pentecostal Studies (APS), Spirit-filled Christianity played host for a much-needed discussion intended to recognise ways urban Aboriginal people continue their culture/s and negotiate spiritualities in the Australian context today. “The Dreaming” is growing in importance within Australia, in part due to the Welcome/Acknowledgement cultural protocols now officiated by the state and many organisations. However, this is largely a Western appropriation of diverse Aboriginal cultures, and spiritualities. Incorporation of The Dreaming is controversial amongst theologians, but even more so in many Aboriginal Pentecostal churches. Following calls for “Makarrata” (a coming together after a struggle) in wider society, this article outlines the need, and possibility, for respectful dialogue that prioritises Aboriginal voices within the church.

Introduction: The Purpose of This Special Edition

This special edition of Australasian Pentecostal studies (APS) breaks new ground by seeking to explore and theologise on the intersection of Aboriginal “Dreaming” spiritualities and Spirit-filled Christianity. The primary purpose is to elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, not as mere tokens, but in order to learn from their deep reservoir of spirituality and faith. In this introduction, I write as a white Pentecostal participant of this dialogue, aware of my privilege and bias. However, I have sought to do my best to listen to the moving and challenging stories of Australia’s Black history and to learn from the profound theological insight of the Aboriginal Elders I have come to love and respect. The goal of this edition is to give readers a similar opportunity; to hear directly from Aboriginal Christians and thus gain insight for themselves, and thereafter, to work toward elevating Aboriginal leadership within Pentecostalism and Spirit-filled Christianity as a whole.

1 This project was funded by ARTFINC (Australian Research Theology Foundation Inc.), which is an independent foundation that promotes theological research and education with an Australian orientation.

2 This introduction does not and is not intended to necessarily represent the views of my co-editors, for whose involvement I am grateful for in this project.
Australian Christians express concern that the religious landscape of their nation is changing rapidly. The certainty by which Australia was proclaimed a Christian nation is now eroding, with most denominations on the sharp decline, while immigrant religions (most notably Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism) increase. In the year 1901, Australian self-reported affiliation with Christianity was 96.1%. Today, it sits at 52%. However, researchers at the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) estimate that only about 16% of the population attend a Christian church regularly (monthly or more).

In response, some Christian leaders have attempted to draw the Australian national religious conversation back into its heritage. Recalling an identity forged in a convict past, and images of iconic tall ships sailing into Sydney Harbour, they cite the classic sermon text of the inaugural parson Richard Johnson. While proponents use this period of Australia’s history to represent triumph over adversity, it is difficult to understand how the First Landing event could be anything other than divisive within a post-colonial Australian context. Aside from the invasion of unceded land, and genocide of pre-existing peoples, this narrative also speaks starkly of lower-class versus upper class realities, of families wrought from their homes, of violent punishment and incarceration, of greed and ambition, and environmental devastation. The question is, should such pictures of Empire offer a continuing rudder to the Australian church?

In contrast to this British-centric narrative, a North American alternative has been offered via amplifying celebrity voices. Parts of the Australian church today seek to enshrine the legacy of prominent North American evangelist (e.g. Billy Graham) crusades. Evangelists continue to be influential, now accessible in Australian homes through various on-demand multimedia technologies. McIntyre argues that Pentecostalism, more than any other Australian Christian movement, adopted and perfected methods of mass-marketing by materialising the gospel into what he describes as “a lifestyle product”. This worked to revitalise congregations, with the market affording an autonomy suitable for the multi-cultural nation. However, the rapidly diminishing relevance of the modern religious voice in the Australian secular sphere is clear. In an unanticipated shift, post-modernity presents a real challenge to the authoritative (particularly white male) preacher and questions many previously held cultural absolutes. Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders come under intense scrutiny in the global media landscape. Overall, Australian public opinion refuses the televangelist as a genuine expression of its national religiosity. However, all is not lost – research shows us that millennial culture longs for a deeper, less ostentatious, spirituality. Therefore,

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4 Ibid. Please note, however, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were famously excluded from the census until 1967, and therefore it is unclear as to whether this figure from the ABS represents all Australians; “1301.0 - Year Book Australia: Religious Affiliation,” Australian Bureau of Statistics, (Canberra: Australian Government, 2006), accessed 20 September, 2016, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/636F496B2B943F12CA2573D200109DA9
perhaps this provides Christians opportunity – alongside the post-modern search – to retrieve something more sacred, more holy.

Recently, The Uluru Statement From the Heart profoundly impacted the Australian national conversation. Released 27th May 2017, in this document, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders claim an inalienable, spiritual right to the continent of Australia. Although largely ignored by leading politicians, recognition of this right has undoubtedly increased in popular imagination over the last decades, through a range of attitudinal shifts and the adoption of local rituals. Welcome to (and Acknowledgement of) Country ceremonies are now commonplace in all government, school, and university meetings. Ironically, Nancy Akehurst acknowledges how smoking ceremonies have been used to rid the preeminent scientific CSIRO building of evil spirits. With Aboriginal ceremonies taking centre stage, at least in many of our major cities, “The Dreaming” is fast becoming Australia’s contemporary public Spirituality.

Aboriginal Christian leaders made a public call to the Australian Church to adopt similar practices, with leading Pentecostal conferences taking part. So, what do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders mean when they refer to “Spirituality”? Furthermore, how does that relate to their Christianity? The research that grounded this present edition of Australasian Pentecostal Studies intended to amplify the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians; particularly regarding their view of the intersections and interactions between Christianity and their culture/s.

**Makarrata and (Re)conciliation**

*The Uluru Statement* recognises a profound reality, that, to date, there has been no meaningful dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Therefore, Aboriginal Elders ask whether the word “reconciliation” could possibly suffice for any revision of this relationship. In his interview in this journal, Uncle Ray Minniecon poignantly asks, “if we are going to go down that track, are we going to be reconciled to that history again? The White Australia policy… all that stuff?” Instead, the Uluru Statement introduces the concept of “Makarrata,” characterising the pre-existing relationship as one of “a struggle.” It acknowledges colonial dominance and power but does not suggest a passive response from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Makarrata also provides the possibility of a “coming together.” However, the spaces for this coming together

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within the Australian church are few and far between. Where do non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Christians “come together” for truth-telling, for engagement, for theologising, for learning?

To fail to acknowledge the history — Settler complicity in the destruction of rich Aboriginal cultures and the strength of Aboriginal resistance — would be a tragic loss. White Australians are prone to ahistoricism. However, a deeper understanding of our history is not only needed for Aboriginal justice but also has the potential to speak sincerely to today’s events and questions. This special edition makes it clear that Aboriginal Christians can lead a theological Makarrata.

During the work on this edition and with the assistance of Aboriginal leaders studying through NAIITS, we were able to identify influential Aboriginal theologians and Christian leaders of urban communities. Key theologians listed by our Aboriginal contributors included Charles (Charlie) Harris, Anne-Patel Grey, Djiniyini Gondarra, Galarwuy Yunupingu, Graham Paulson, and George Rosendale. Critical texts cited included the influential Rainbow Spirit Theology from The Rainbow Spirit Elders. However, the omission of these texts within many of Australia’s theological libraries show that the many efforts to include Aboriginal voices in theological and biblical studies departments have been limited and inconsistent.

Other works also seem to have been forgotten (or ignored) by the Australian church. For example, in the basement of Sydney University’s library is a microfiche dissertation written by anthropologist Malcolm Calley.

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12 Formerly North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies, an Indigenous-led college active in Australia via Whitley College.
His 1955 study was written during the era of Australian segregation. It vividly describes two opposing Australian religiosities; the “old rule” of the Dreaming and the Christian religion that sought to replace it. Calley outlined how the Bundjalung peoples of the New South Wales coastline gathered at bora rings (or ceremonial circles) for dancing (or “corroboree”), with their initiated marugan or “clever men” curating these sacred land sites. He paralleled these rituals against the local hymn-singing white congregations who dutifully listened to the “dogma” of their male clergy in their Christian worship services, and boasted similarly “righteous” and “authorised” missionaries with their curated religious outstations. Although he states, “The clever men are all dead,” their power lived on in the minds of the clergy who placed embargoes on “drinking, smoking and clever men” who were seen as “…[the] black powers of darkness, a rival force.”

Calley’s observations were not only of religious struggle. He also describes a local space in which the two systems interacted, in the “mixed blood” Bundjalung Pentecostal churches that had existed on the East Coast since before the 1920s. It was an entirely new religious movement, about which he declares,

Aboriginal Pentecostalism is not merely a welding of Christianity onto a mixed blood community. It is an integration of a new religion into the social framework of the old… the new religion, like the old, is partly magical and aspects of both the indigenous and alien cultures has [sic] been verified.

Here, it can be noted that the observed “magical” elements could have been from either the Pentecostal or the Aboriginal spiritualities. Pentecostalism has long offered a re-enchanted vision of the world.

The influence of Aboriginal Christianity on the church in our nation has been profound, and Aboriginal theologising is not new. Neither is the effectiveness of their evangelism strategies and spiritualities for speaking into public space. So why are the voices of the Black Pentecostal/charismatics still hidden in Australia’s wider theological and secular discourses?

“The Dreaming” and Christianity: Amplifying Aboriginal Authors

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 54% of Indigenous Australians self-identify as Christian. Thus, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christianity is higher than in the wider population.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics only around 2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples practice “traditional religions.” However, the response “no religion” is increasing at a rapid rate. There

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21 Ibid, 11.
22 Ibid, 49.
23 Ibid, 4, 47.
are valid questions regarding the terminology used in surveys. But famously, leading sociologist Nancy Ammerman has rejected the idea of “spiritual, not religious” as two binary systems opposed to one other. She states;

Rather than assume that "religion" is best measured in organizational belonging and traditional belief, while spirituality is best seen as an individual experiential creation, we would do well to recognize that both have institutional producers.

This allows for recognition of ways Aboriginal Christians continue their culture and negotiate their spiritualities today in the Australian context.

The largest Christian denominational affiliations are Anglican and Catholic, often attributed to the pervasiveness of their missions (whether measured by their historical presence, finance spent, amount of missionaries, or geographic spread). But Indigenous communities’ relationship with the missions movement was and continues to be complicated, and extremely varied. As Aboriginal scholar, Vicki Grieves, states;

Aboriginal Australians today may live predominantly within one or the other of the ontological/epistemological systems, glossed as Aboriginal or Western. In either case, they have to contend not only with the existence and influence of the other but are continually dealing with a world in which these different ontologies collide. Aboriginal scholars, men and women of high degree, the inheritors of the lifeways, seek to preserve the philosophical basis of the culture and promote it as a possible and practicable way of interpreting our histories, explaining the present and moving forward into the future. Central to this philosophy is what Aboriginal people have come to refer to in English as Spirituality, the basis of our existence and way of life that informs our relationships to the natural world, human society and the universe.

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28 Ibid, 18


30 The spread of Christianity is often attributed to the Australian missions movement, however much was due to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evangelists. See: Peggy Brock, Norman Etherington, Gareth Griffiths and Jacqueline Van Gent, Indigenous Evangelists and Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750-1940, Studies in a Christian Mission (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015) DOI: 10.1163/9789004299344

31 Vickie Grieves, Aboriginal spirituality: Aboriginal philosophy, the basis of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (Darwin: Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009), 2-3.
Nevertheless, Grieves warns against creating “Aboriginal theologies.” This silences Aboriginal and Torres Strait perspectives, which in turn continues to perpetuate the view of Western European Christianity as opposed to Aboriginal spirituality. In many ways, rejecting Aboriginal theologies effectively rejects Aboriginal Christians.

Instead, this journal proposes prioritising Aboriginal explanations of how diverse theologies and spiritualities can co-exist, as representative of the many indigenous peoples who constitute the global church.

The Potentials (and Problems) of Pentecostal/charismatic Theologies

Only 2.7% of Aboriginal people identify as Pentecostal, twice as many as the broader population (ABS 2011). This figure may seem only a small percentage. However, many of our authors note the movement as being influential on Aboriginal Christianity as a whole. For this reason, we devised the term “Spirit-filled” to indicate the synergies between Pentecostals and charismatics who worship within other denominations and churches. The idea that experiential “Spirit-filled” Christianity play host to a discussion on spiritualities and theology is potentially counterintuitive and certainly unexpected. However, Pentecostal scholars argue that providing such space is conducive to the Spirit’s creative work.

Although often presented as such, Pentecostalism is not a white religion. It is now a “global South” religion highly influential amongst indigenous Latin Americans and Africans. In the West, similar discussions about the intersections of culture and faith have been documented amongst Alaskan Native Americans, Mexican Yucatan, the urban British Caribbean diaspora and Hispanic peoples in New York City. Pentecostalism and culture has been famously explored among the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea. In fact, according to Nimi Wariboko, Nigerian Christianity is now structured into two types, ‘non-African African Christians” and “African Christians.” This last category he splits further, into “Spirit-filled” or Pentecostal, and the African Initiated Churches (AICs) - both of which grew out of the indigenous Yoruba Aladura revivals.

32 Ibid, 18
37 Nimi Wariboko, Nigerian Pentecostalism (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014)
Pentecostalism has its strengths, but also its drawbacks. For example, while traditionally it distinguished itself via the practice of glossolalia or “speaking in tongues,” in the Nigerian context there are few clear markers of commitment. Thus a Pentecostal “exclusive, superior religious identity” has emerged, and become a highly contentious topic within Nigerian communities.\textsuperscript{38} Wariboko notes;

…they differentiate themselves from the mainline, “orthodox,” “dead” Christians. They are now ‘non-Christian Christians’ …what the “identity politics” of Pentecostalism shows is the impossibility of any identity coinciding with itself or any believer (African or otherwise) coinciding with herself, and the impossibility of identifying any universal sameness… Pentecostalism renders all distinctions, divisional markings and classes inoperative without abolishing them.\textsuperscript{39}

Throughout the formation of this edition, the potentials for dialogue became clear, but also the potential for conflict.

\textbf{The Dreaming, “Syncretism” and “Synchronicity”}

As many of our contributors note, “The Dreaming” does not always sit well with Aboriginal Christians. The term itself was formed from the engagement of anthropologists with the Arrernte Central Desert peoples.\textsuperscript{40} It can be thought of as an English “gloss” upon the vast diversities of spiritualities and cultures found across Australia. There is often confusion about local practice, and mystery about how Christianity relates to Dreaming Spiritualities, if at all.

For Aboriginal Pentecostals in particular, the interaction between Christianity and Dreaming symbols has been complex. This is epitomised in Sallie Anderson’s article “Rejecting the Rainbow Serpent: An Aboriginal Artist’s Choice of the Christian God as Creator.” She describes an interaction in Cairns between two Aboriginal artists and gallery owners, who negotiate and reinforce their identities within their local art market. When Norman, a Pentecostal pastor, chose not to display two pictures of the Rainbow Serpent due to connotations with local New Age practices, this offended his peers and created a media outrage. However, in his defence, Anderson writes:

The authors of many New Age books on Aboriginal culture and spirituality pick and choose characteristics from ethnographic descriptions of various rainbow serpent myths that seemingly support their comparisons with the Kundalini, electromagnetism, Vishnu, fertility and death, vibration and energy sources and various other themes.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 215
\textsuperscript{39} Wariboko, \textit{Nigerian Pentecostalism}, Kindle Loc 1815
\textsuperscript{41} Sallie Anderson, “Rejecting the Rainbow Serpent: An Aboriginal Artist’s Choice of the Christian God as Creator”, \textit{The Australian Journal of Anthropology (TAJA)}, 12, no. 3 (2001): 297
She concludes what many of our contributors also do about The Dreaming, that it is often an essentialising construct, and states;

I suggest that anthropologists have unwittingly established and contributed to the notion of the rainbow serpent as the pre-eminent creator figure in Aboriginal Dreaming myths and spirituality. As noted above, it is often difficult to trace the way anthropological analysis is incorporated into New Age literature due to a lack of thorough referencing in such books. If references are found, they are often incomplete or ambiguous as to which specific articles or books are being referenced. While this creates a difficulty for tracing the use of anthropological research in New Age literature, I attempt to identify the way rainbow serpent mythology has been transformed into an icon of Aboriginal spirituality.42

There are complexities to accepting white versions of Dreaming practice in order to conduct a wider conversation about Australian spiritualities. However, Eugene Stockton considers any desire to silence the other as a continuing impact of a lack of reconciliation;

In conflict one side sets out not to destroy but to contain the other, exacting only sufficient retaliation. In the face of outside threat, such as that posed by European invasion, there is a creative accommodation to test the limits of what one might salvage of control and advantage in an overall adverse condition.43

It is impossible not to note how Western voices control the discussion. But for listening allies and advocates, it becomes far more difficult when two Aboriginal artists conflict over images.

The clarion call from Aboriginal theologian Anne Pattel-Gray is for her contemporaries to move beyond a mere “hybridity”, and “to become fully Aboriginal through the inculturation of Christ into our midst.”44 Graham Paulson agrees, but also warns in his watershed theological piece,

Of course it means that some parts of Aboriginal culture will be adopted, some will be adapted, and as is the case in all cultural developments, some may be rejected.45

It is important to note the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, and therefore the hybridities that exist. There is also distinction between the charismatic and Pentecostal approaches to the issue, as outlined in Fiona Magowan’s article in the same journal, which demonstrates the embodied or experienced “synchronicity” between Ancestral Law and Christianity for the Yolngu of Galiwin’ku; a “synchronicity” between land and being; between spirit and emotion; as well as biblical and mystical revelation.46 The ongoing liberating dialogue (or “communion”47) amongst Spirit-filled Aboriginal Christianity in Australia is still unfolding.

43 Stockton, "The Dreaming in Australian Aboriginal Culture" 154.
45 Paulson, Towards an Aboriginal Theology, 312.
46 Fiona Magowan, “Syncretism or Synchronicity? Remapping the Yolngu Feel of Place” TAJA, 12, no. 3 (2010): 275-290
47 Pattel-Gray, “The Aboriginal Process of Inculturation,” 15
The Process of This Special Edition

A grant from ARTFINC assisted the project’s aims of facilitating conversation about The Dreaming and Christianity (but particularly its “Spirit-filled” subcultures of charismatc and Pentecostal forms). The project has taken a number of forms – oral theologising, and written pieces.

In 2016 a one-day theological symposium was organised by Waka Waka woman and co-editor Brooke Prentis at the Grasstree conference in Sydney hosted by the Uniting Theological College, Parramatta. The editors addressed conference attendees, and symposium presenters included Adam Gowen, Ray Minniecon, Steve Bevis & Uncle Rex Granites Japanangka, David Armstrong and Shane Clifton, Safina Stewart, and Brooke Prentis. Feedback from attendees was that they appreciated the project, but especially how presenters engaged theological ideas and represented what was important to them as Aboriginal people.

Following this, a panel discussion was held in the yarn-up tent of the Surrender Conference in Melbourne. It was attended by a smaller group of around 40 delegates. Presenters included Adam Gowen, Brooke Prentis, and Anderson George. This led to a productive discussion about the difference between “The Dreaming” in rural areas, or “on country” and in an urban context. In particular, Anderson presented his view that he had broken completely with parts of Dreaming ceremony as “evil.” The conversation that ensued helped urban Aboriginal attendees to clarify that “The Dreaming” represented everything of culture – including language. Anderson had not broken with all “culture” in his context, but only “men’s ceremony.” For urban and rural Aboriginal people from different nations to have a discussion that was not mediated by (but supported by) white Australian voices was extremely powerful.

Within this special edition, the published articles and interviews were intended to amplify the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Birripi woman and ordained Anglican priest Karen Kime and Monica Short undertake participatory research together to explore themes of colonisation, power, and injustice within Anglican churches in the Bush. Shane Clifton and Ingrid Ryan work with Wangkumara man and Pentecostal Pastor David Armstrong to document his journey in negotiating his identities and how that affected his ministry and life. Anderson George, assisted by Rachel Borneman reflects upon his decision not to attend men’s ceremonies in the Katherine area of the Northern Territory.

Also, there is a range of interviews conducted with influential Aboriginal Christian leaders. Pastors Will (Birripi) and Sandra Dumas (Bundjalung) represent the Indigenous Initiative of the Australian Christian Churches denomination (formerly the Assemblies of God). They are senior pastors of Ganggalah Church in Tweed Heads and facilitate a network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait pastors across the nation. From Darwin in the Northern Territory, this includes Yidinji woman Christie Jacobs who now serves at Hillsong Darwin, daughter of influential worship leader Robyn Green. Mamu sisters Robyn Ober and Glenda Ramsey represent another influential Darwin church planting family with leadership roles in Hillsong Darwin but also in Christian organisations including Women’s Aglow and The Batchelor Institute. Pastor Ray Minniecon speaks as a prominent Christian elder with links to many Australian denominations, now running Scarred Tree Ministries from St John’s Glebe, Sydney. Also in New South Wales, Wiradjuri man Adam Gowen speaks as an Apostolic pastor working in the South Coast region. There are two interviews from the ecumenical college Wontulp Bi Buya College in Cairns, Queensland.
Victor Joseph is Principal of this College and a Torres Strait Islander priest within the North Queensland Anglican Diocese. Davena Munro is Wontulp’s RTO and Business Operations Manager and a Butchulla/Garawa woman from Fraser Island, K’gari, and the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north Queensland area.

In this brief editorial, I have deliberately shied away from attempting to summarise the perspectives of our numerous authors. Aboriginal spirituality was never a single thing, and the perspectives in this volume reflect its diverse spirituality, as well as that of Pentecostalism(s) in Australia and globally. Additionally, there is an inherent colonial danger in me as a white Australian attempting to summarise (and hence whitewash) Aboriginal voices. The goal of this project was from the beginning to allow spirit filled Aboriginal people to speak for themselves, and in what follows they do so powerfully. As one of the editors, rather than this being the conclusion of the project, I hope that this can be a new beginning of listening to Aboriginal Christians with new ears, as we together seek Makarrata.

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