

Anderson's view on Aboriginal Christian Spirituality:

“Who are you putting first in your life?”

Anderson George and Rachel Borneman

Abstract

This paper explores the faith of Anderson George – a Wuagalak Aboriginal man who now lives on Jawoyn country, Wugularr community (also known as Beswick). Anderson's Christian experience is foundationally shaped by his convictions of the Holy Spirit in his reading of the Bible. The paper unpacks Anderson's experience of culture, and the way in which it has informed his spiritual life and navigation of Christian and Indigenous traditions. While the primary objective of this paper is to allow Anderson George to speak on his own terms, some supporting literature enables the authors to frame Anderson's position on navigating both cultural traditions, both in terms of presenting the nuances embedded in anthropological notions of indigenisation along with Anderson's, and the “One Way” movement's theological distinctives. As such, these conversations distinguish the argument in this paper from one *purely about culture* to one that is directed by Anderson's active *discernment of the spirit/s*.

The interaction between Dreaming and the Christian faith is often contentious in communities. For example, in Beswick,¹ some respected community men have taken a stand to say, “no more sacred ceremonies.” As one of these men and as an Aboriginal Christian leader from this community, Anderson George shares his view on the way in which the Holy Spirit has convicted him about sacred and smoking ceremonies (particularly worshipping other spirits). While Anderson's particular approach, which involves a rejection of Aboriginal ceremony, is contrasting to those who express a desire to “redeem” Indigenous culture, including by those who also profess a sincere Christian faith, Anderson's perspective contributes a unique voice to this discussion, representing the diversity of spirituality within Aboriginal world. In so doing, he challenges some of the presumptions about Aboriginal spirituality that often underlie the surface of such discussions.

Introducing the Authors and our Method

Anderson is an Aboriginal man who originated from Ngukurr, with some time spent in North East Arnhemland, but now resides in Beswick community. In Ngukurr he had a strong Christian grandmother who would read the Bible to him. Anderson gives thanks to the Lord who healed him from witchcraft in 1998. Since then, Anderson has had a heart to share and preach the Gospel. He is married to Emeriah and has two sons, a

¹ Beswick is 110 kilometers east from Katherine, Northern Territory.

daughter and an adopted son. His extended family also live in Beswick, a place where their identities are deeply established.

Rachel grew up in the Northern Territory and serves with Wycliffe Bible Translators along the Central Arnhem Highway — a Kriol speaking area. She has come to know Anderson and his family over many years and has often heard him share his view on culture and Christianity, reflecting upon the impact of the Holy Spirit's revelation in his life. When Rachel heard from Brooke Prentis about this project that would explore the intersection between Indigenous and Christian spiritualities, Rachel knew straight away that she would recommend Anderson for his insight on the topic, as he had experienced traditional ceremony and worked out what he believed. (However, as Rachel is not indigenous, and has not experienced traditional ceremony, she does not hold an opinion as to which view is wrong or right).

As such, Anderson and Rachel began work on this paper at the annual Surrender conference in Melbourne in March 2018.² Both had attended this conference for at least seven years and so when Anderson was provided the opportunity to share his story as part of a panel, it was an open door to his involvement in this project. This panel, facilitated by Tanya Riches, was recorded and forms the basis of this paper. Rachel transcribed the panel and gained some help from the editorial team to turn this into an academic paper. Rachel and Anderson also met and talked at various times (including out at Beswick). He has provided comments and approval throughout the process. The priority throughout has been Anderson's voice and perspective. Sharing stories orally is the way that people from Anderson's background present their views on life. This paper therefore draws heavily upon Anderson's verbal account. So, boil the kettle and grab a cuppa as Anderson would have you do if he were sharing his story face-to-face with you.

This paper begins with a thank you, shaped in a manner that reflects Anderson's priorities. Following this, Anderson then shares the story of his journey to the Christian faith and his understanding of the heart of God regarding his participation in traditional ceremonies. The scope of the discussion then broadens by considering perspectives on the meaning of 'culture' and intersection between Christianity and Dreaming world views in the Northern Territory, with special reference to ceremonial practice. Anderson's views are woven throughout, and the important relationship between 'place' and 'story' is elevated within the discussion. Literature produced by and for ministers operating within the Indigenous-Christian sphere is provided for context, followed by a brief review of some helpful academic literature. As the paper draws to a close, Anderson's opinion on 'closing the gap' is presented before his concluding statement inviting his readers to put God first in their life.

Acknowledgement of Country

Anderson opened his talk with a 'thank you' to acknowledge the traditional owners of Belgrave Heights, Victoria, the land on which Surrender was held. In this context, the 'thank you' is also a significant protocol to acknowledge how *place* has formed this article, along with Anderson's own knowledge on the matter being discussed;

² Surrender is one of the few Australian Christian conferences that elevates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander faith and spirituality.

I want to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for [this opportunity and also] I want to say thank you to the Traditional Owners. I have shared with a lot of people [individually] but this is the first time to share it with a lot of people at Surrender conference and now in this paper.

Anderson's Testimony

Like many Aboriginal people, Anderson's conversion took place in the form of a string of events. He recounts;

I was blessed and privileged to have a grandmother, so devoted to the Lord, who read the Bible. It was a bedtime story for us. As a kid I saw a vision of an angel coming and taking my soul... Jesus used my Christian cousin in the mid '80's to come visit me in Berrimah Prison.

God said, "Wake up Anderson, wake up" to stop sinning. My sister Loretta kept praying for me, even when I was an alcoholic, sniffing petrol. In 1998 I was saved, and had a faith in Jesus, as small as a mustard seed. I knelt down and was praying in my language, Kriol. The Lord just spoke clearly, "Anderson, do you want a good life or a bad life?" [I accepted Christ] and just cried more than I had ever cried. My sister and brother-in-law laid hands. I was delivered from witchcraft, drugs, gunja, petrol sniffing, cigarette. He is a forgiving and loving Father." ³

I [had been] dying slowly of witchcraft. I had a Grandfather who was a witch doctor and I would question, "how come he didn't heal me?"

[But] there is counterfeit healing, and true healing only comes from Jesus Christ. The Lord came and healed me and ever since then, I have been preaching and sharing about Jesus.

I have not been to Bible College, but through the journey growing up as a Christian, I had to really focus on the Lord. The Holy Spirit has revealed to me, because he is the teacher, comforter, counsellor, helper and He knows the Word. I didn't have time to be a baby Christian. God just raised me up. It has been 19 years. Being a Christian means being part of the largest tribe of the world.

Anderson's Relationship with Ceremonies

The topic of being in and practicing the ceremonies was burning on my heart as an Indigenous man. The Lord really put on my heart [in 1998] to ask Him a question. Reflecting back to when I was a teenager in 1982, involved in a sacred men's ceremony. I spoke in Kriol, "Dedi God gin ai weship la yu en weship main serramoni? Bikos main old pastor weship yu Sandei en wen det serramoni bin on imbin weship det serramoni, gin ai dum lagijjat?"

³ Living Stones Media Foundation "40 stories - Anderson George Beswick NT 40 Stories - Jesus Moments" 1 March 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHqj5JI-2rE>

The translation in English is, "Can I worship you Father God, can I worship you and worship my ceremony? My old pastor back in Ngukurr where I come from - he worshipped you on Sunday and when the sacred ceremony i.e. secret men's business was on, I saw him worshipping [i.e. dreaming spirits/totems/ ancestor animal spirits]. Can I do that? Can I serve God and serve Ceremony?"⁴

For Anderson, Joshua 24.15, speaks of the secret men's business that uses idols and totems to honour the Dreaming ancestor and animal spirits. Reflecting upon this Scripture Anderson says;

God made me realise, when I was being initiated ... that the ceremonies [promoted] a wooden object and that in these ceremonies we were worshipping idols. From [that point I thought], I didn't want to believe and be involved in the old way or interfere with them. It has led to total transformation, freedom, healing and blessing. [Now for] 19 years I have been healed from witchcraft... I give thanks to the Lord and give Him the glory for it. Amen.

Anderson notes the pressure and role that ceremonies play, particularly for men who have not participated in ceremonies;

Blackfella jealous saying, "You're still young men because you haven't seen ceremony." They think that you need to go into the ceremony to be a man. I could boast about taking you to the business-men or lawmen [Traditional Aboriginal Sacred Ceremony leaders]. I choose to speak 'blessings' to you rather than to take you to worship the ceremony. Because what good will it do to you? The Bible talks, "what good will it be for someone to gain/profit the whole world and to lose their own soul?." [Matthew 16:26]

Here, it is important to note that Anderson's observations of ceremonial practice, including the participation of Christians in sacred men's ceremony, mainly took place as he grew up in the late 70's and into the 80's in Ngukurr, prior to his conversion to Christianity.⁵ But as his family is from Ngukurr, he still visits from time to time. Anderson says that he did not talk this over with his former pastor, Gumbuli, or have direct conversation about matters of ceremony, or understand that Gumbuli later expressed concerns about ceremony and maintaining that nothing stands in the way of recognising God as creator and worshiping of certain spirits.⁶ Gumbuli was later to reject⁷ the ceremonies he had previously been involved in, which is similar to Anderson. Unlike Anderson (after he became a Christian), Gumbuli would still be involved in some ceremonies such as 'camp', 'the village,' happiness, and circumcision ceremonies. Gumbuli saw these ceremonies as "'good,' 'clean' ceremony and

⁴ Christian leaders hold a variety of views towards ceremonies. Some attend both public and sacred ceremonies, some attend public ceremonies but not sacred ones and some reject them altogether.

⁵ Anderson became a Christian in 1998, which was two years after he left Ngukurr.

⁶ Seiffert, *Gumbuli of Ngukurr: Aboriginal Elder in Arnhem Land*, (Brookvale, New South Wales: Acorn Press, 2011), 329.

⁷ Ibid, 338.

dancing – the ‘honest way’... It's nothing [being] worshipped there. Nothing to be frightened [of].⁸ Anderson, on the other hand, will sit and watch public ceremonies but won't be painted up or become involved.

Gumbuli also supported circumcision ceremonies, including those for two of his grandsons, mainly because “[it] might contain good teaching of the law.”⁹ Anderson, however, will not encourage his sons or other Christians in town to participate in sacred ceremony, including circumcision ceremony. He will not let his own boys participate because of his reference to the scriptural passage, “but for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” [Joshua 24:15]. He has chosen to take his boys to the hospital to be circumcised because of health issues and will teach them at home.

Anderson also acknowledges that “not everyone [or all Aboriginal Christians] has come to the same conclusion [revelation or] approach...between ceremonies and the Christian faith.”¹⁰ By this, he is not only referring to Gumbuli but also any of the Christian leaders whom he knew at Ngukurr. For example, he reflects on a particular scenario where this is the case;

I was sharing with my cousin-sisters¹¹ who have been serving the Lord for years and brothers, where I originally come from. They said, “God gave us ceremony.”¹² I said, “show me in the Bible, maybe I am reading the wrong Bible. God showed me [what I now believe about ceremonies and], I will stick with it.”¹³

He continues;

But for me as an individual person, I believe God at his Word. I won't add to the Word I received or take out of it. Because in the book of Revelation 22:18-19 [the] word of God says, 'If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. And if anyone removes any of these words from this book, God will remove that person's share in the book of life and in the holy city described in this book'. There is a warning in the book of Revelation that comes out from there. That's what really scares me. I am not afraid to die from witchcraft. I don't care what people do to me. I am more afraid of God's judgment.

Reflecting on his years growing up in Ngukurr, Anderson notes in contrast to this, “I remember an [Indigenous]

⁸ Ibid, 325, 328

⁹ Ibid, 329.

¹⁰ Ibid, 336.

¹¹ In Indigenous skin system, the children of a mother's sister (often referred to as cousins in western contexts) are called 'sisters.' As such, sometimes the term 'cousin sisters' is used by Indigenous people amongst a western audience, to capture both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous terminology.

¹² Seiffert provides this definition, “For Christian Aborigines who follow the ‘two-way’ approach, a central idea is that ‘God gave us the Dreaming,’ finding God-given merit in the old ways, which should not be discarded without good reason. Thus, the ‘old ways’ were reviewed for consistency with the Bible, resulting in some practices being discarded. See: Seiffert, 326.

¹³ It's important to note, that Anderson's aversion to ceremonial practices being observed by other people “is about exposing the devil, not so much the church leaders.”

deacon, my Aunt, ¹⁴ sharing that a whitefella missionary had told her [the deacon] that it was okay to worship ceremony and daddy God.” Additionally, in the 1960s, about the time when Anderson was born, a missionary who was enthusiastic about attending ceremonies, arrived at Ngukurr. This attitude was quite different from most, if not all of the early missionaries at Roper River, as until then, the mission had not endorsed traditional ceremony along with their associated activities and beliefs. ¹⁵ This missionary may have been the influence on the deacon who later talked with Anderson.

Anderson explains the revelation that he has received from God about who to serve and his refusal to participate in ceremony;

“In Mathew 6:24, Jesus says, *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money and man's things.”* That's why we need to think about who we are serving and what we are doing. That's been on my heart.”

This, Anderson says, is “One Way,” which means you need to leave all traditional ceremonies. ¹⁶

Skin system

Anderson also refers to other situations in which he has felt the need to break with culture. For example, in the Indigenous Australian skin system law in Arnhemland, you cannot talk directly to your mother-in-law or look at each other, and [need to] avoid being in the same room together. ¹⁷ This is still followed and respected as priority. He describes an encounter where skin system law and Christian culture came into conflict;

My mother-in-law and her son approached me for prayer, because I was preaching about looking unto Jesus - He is the healer, not me – and because she was sick (with an asthma attack) and needing prayer. I was put on the spot to pray for people and my mother in-law was one of them. Her son stood in the gap [to mediate] between us, as she was wanting prayer. I walked towards her cautiously and respectfully to pray for her. I then said, “today when I lay my hands on you. I will no longer call you mother-in-law (gajin/poison cousin) but your son in Christ and you will be my aunty in Christ.” She nodded her head to give approval. She was healed that day.

By keeping the same skin name, but swapping to the alternative role as aunty, it helps to break down spiritual barriers and make it more open, so I can approach her safely including to pray for her, talk to her and ask for things. Whereas if I still saw her as my mother-in-law, I could not have laid hands on her.

¹⁴ Through Aboriginal Skin system.

¹⁵ Seiffert, 325

¹⁶ However, Seiffert makes it clear in 2011 that it “appears that ordained leaders will not be [traditional] ceremony leaders... and it seems that “one way” is the only way for a leader in the church in Ngukurr’ See: Seiffert, 338

¹⁷ Joy Sandefur, *“The Aboriginalisation of the church of Ngukurr”* (PhD diss., Latrobe University, Bundoora, 1998) 249.

Anderson is not alone in this view. Respected anthropologist Joy Sanderfur¹⁸ states that;

Some feel that as Christians, it is better to show respect by over-riding the avoidance relationship and relating to the person in a way that does not exclude them. When this happens in the church or in the community, the relationship is traced back by a different route. In one case I know of, it was changed from mother-in-law and son-in-law to aunty and nephew... When one person wants to change and other does not, it is not changed.¹⁹

Sorcery

Anderson now regards Jesus as the 'true healer' and has therefore rejected local forms of healing practice;

I have seen some people being healed throughout the Territory with witchcraft, with some family paying for clever man to come to Darwin to heal family at the hospital. In a couple of days, they will get sick again. But Jesus is the true healer and free one. What we receive from the gospel freely we give [to others], free.

Traditional Worship in the Church

The same principles that guide Anderson's decision not to participate in various ceremonies, also flow into his choices regarding worship in the church.

I don't use the didjeridu for Christian worship because it conveys meanings that are incompatible with the Christian message when played in my community. I do not want to put up "any stumbling block or obstacle" [Romans 14:13] to people that have seen the didjeridu being played in cultural corroboree, which supports idol worship.²⁰

It is important to note that Anderson does not expect this to be true for an urban setting;

To play didjeridu in Darwin (in an urban setting) ... if it's going to reach out to the person then great. If it's for your own pleasure (to benefit you) then it is not right. Ask God for wisdom... Once, I heard a Christian non-Indigenous man playing the didjeridu with a Christian Indigenous man who was playing the guitar and there was an anointing.²¹

¹⁸ Joy Sanderfur lived in Ngukurr from 1976-1989 and was involved in Bible Translation.

¹⁹ Sanderfur, 249 – 250.

²⁰ Rachel Borneman, personal communication with Anderson George, 12 February 2018.

²¹ Ibid, 15 October 2017.

Murray Seiffert who authored *Gumbuli of Ngukurr*,²² notes that in South Eastern Arnhem Land, didjeridus and clap sticks are not used in Christian services. This is probably because of their association with traditional ceremonies and the desire to not mix them with Christian ceremonies.²³

The Men Negotiate 'The Dreaming' and 'Christianity'

Anderson says that Beswick was the first community in the Northern Territory in which three respected community men, got up and said, "no more [sacred] ceremonies." It was a big thing for the community of Beswick. Now other Christian men are making the same stand in other communities.

This debate affects how often men attend the church. The old people told me that the ceremony in our area, up in the Ngukurr and Beswick area was run by women a long time ago...ancestral time, but men fell in love with this thing because there was a totem of women spirits in the sacred ceremony. So, I asked this old man, 'how come there is a woman in the ceremony?' He told me, 'this ceremony was run by a woman in the old days, and men fell in love with the ceremony'. It gave me an understanding to look back with a Christian point of view. How Satan came in and bounded up the men. That's why I believe for me personally, there's not a lot of our men in the churches throughout the Territory, you hardly see many men in the church. Or men strong in their faith in the Lord getting up to preach about these things. But you see a lot of the women in the church.

Seiffert illustrates that it is seemingly more common for women to disassociate themselves from ceremony than men. His suggested explanation for this is that for men in particular, participation in ceremony attributes personal status derived from particular ceremonial roles, and that they are reluctant to lose this status.²⁴ Anderson laments the imbalance of men to women in church attendance. He continues;

I told you that story, because the Lord reminded me Satan came to bring deception on the men to keep them bound up. Somewhere along the line [Satan] must have known that one day the gospel was going to reach Australia. That's why a lot of men don't speak when they come to church. When I am getting up to preach about ceremony throughout Arnhem Land, the women put their heads down. This is because they are not allowed to hear these things [under Aboriginal Law]. Because being a Christian, getting up boldly because of what God has given me, I am not getting up to make a fight, I am getting up to preach the truth. I am here to expose the devil.

²²Seiffert had significant contact with the missions, especially during his time as Academic Dean of Nungalinga College, Darwin. See: Kara Martin, "A great man, and an inspiring Aboriginal Christian story" Sydney Anglicans, January 5, 2012, <https://sydneyanglicans.net/blogs/books/a-great-man-and-an-inspiring-aboriginal-christian-story>

²³ Seiffert, 331

²⁴ Ibid, 327.

I was getting ready to go to this meeting. And yet these men got up and said, "we won't have any more ceremonies." We also don't participate in ceremonies, because of our fathers before us. For example, my brother-in-law's father told him to give up worshipping ceremony and dream time belief system. You have to draw a line, between who to worship. That's why I have been blessed today. I am there [Christian and alive and healed and set free from witchcraft] because of my brother, brother-in-law and sister.

Leaving Your Land, Family

Anderson's Christian faith has reoriented his position on land and family. It is important to note that the essence of the biblical passages upon which Anderson George draws, are about putting God first and foremost in one's life, after which all other things follow. Anderson states;

Even my land I gave up. It's biblical because in Matthew 19:29 it says, "If you leave your mother, father, brothers, sisters, husband, wife, even your children, and your land for my sake, you will receive one hundred-fold." Giving up your land is one of the things God knew about Indigenous people in this country of Australia.

I had to tell my mum and my wife, 'I love you, but from now on I love God [more]. I cried because I meant it from my heart'. The Bible speaks about the two commandments, here is the first commandment that Jesus said, '*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength*'. We say in Beswick '*Mainbun*' which comes from the Mayali language. *Mainbun* means 'honour him, worship him' with all your being. The second commandment is '*Love your neighbour as you love yourself*'. It has nothing to do with ceremony or dream time. That's how I can worship God as an Indigenous person, or [at least, that's] how I look at it.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then these things will be added to you [Matthew 6:33]. [This happens when] we put the Lord first and are willing to sacrifice. I have a picture of why Jesus died for me and I can't thank him enough. There is nothing I can do but serve him with humility.

Smoking and Welcome Ceremonies

Anderson George outlined some of his own beliefs about ceremonies, including smoking ceremonies, which are often 'to discourage the dead person's spirit from hanging around [where they lived and died]'.²⁵ Here he talks about his decision not to participate,

With non-Christians who participate in ceremony, or smoking Ceremony, [they are] still family, and ask for things from each other, but when they participate in ceremony I do not get involved. I stand away

²⁵ Sandefur, 239

from them. If I run into them in the community, I don't ask them anything about ceremony, but if they talk to me about ceremony, I say, "it's for you and not for me. I do not want to serve any other gods [Exodus 20:3]."

Having lived in Ngukurr, Sandefur reflects on the response of two other Ngukurr Christian Aboriginals in relation to death and smoking practice;

When a Christian woman died, her son and daughter-in-law, who were also Christians, saw no reason to have their house smoked, where she had died. They believed her spirit had gone to be with God and that the house did not need to be smoked. However, the grandchildren who did not have the same Christian convictions insisted that the house be smoked. The Christian couple went bush for the day and had nothing to do with the smoking. They moved back into their house the same day."²⁶

The particular theology of Christian Aboriginal people like Anderson has created conflict in the community and so he has often felt the need to clarify and defend his worldview. Furthermore, Anderson's views are comparable with those of well-known leaders like Ewan Martin, Aboriginal Elder from Weemol NT, Cairns-based artist Norman Miller, and Graham Paulson, Brisbane-based Aboriginal Elder. It is important to note the central place of testimony, or story, in Anderson's articulation of his navigation of two cultural heritages, including his engagement with the spirit realm. Anderson desires that his adoption of the Christian faith is understood as God's providence in his life, and a conscious decision on his part to embrace it;

Some people have criticized me over the years, but this story is not about myself but how God came into my life and healed me. I was going with people on a mission trip and there was a smoking ceremony happening. The other non-Indigenous walked into the ceremony but I didn't want to. As a non-indigenous it seems like a harmless act, but as Indigenous, to my knowledge, it's about sending the dead spirit back home to his or her country to make it peaceful for people to not get attacked [by the dead person's spirit].

It's connected to spiritual things [and] that's why I don't join in. Because in Hebrews 12:2 Jesus Christ is the author and the finisher of our faith. When we die, our spirit is not going back to our own homeland but to God's Homeland (heaven), a better place.

When I am down South, and the mob perform Welcome to Country with a smoking ceremony, it's a spiritual thing. It's not a good thing. I would not participate or attend but go walkabout instead and go to the football - but then I need to be careful not to be worshipping football as well!

Because of Anderson's worldview, he is uncomfortable with the smoking ceremony, where "smoking gum leaves are held in their hands," after someone dies. This is "to discourage the dead person's spirit from hanging around."²⁷

²⁶ Ibid, 242

²⁷ Ibid, 152

It is important to note that Anderson's position is not really about *rejection* of these ceremonies, but a demonstrated allegiance to his Christian faith as an Aboriginal man. His participation in certain events and decision not to participate in others, demonstrates Christianity to those observing, and declares who he is 'putting first in his life.' Seiffert explains that there is a difference between encouraging culture in a setting of "young families who have been long removed from their traditional ceremonies" as to a community setting where "the culture has the potential to move into practices such as sorcery and the exploitation of women - the very things that Barnabus Roberts' generation discarded."^{28, 29}

Defining Culture

Given his interactions with Western tradition and worldview, Anderson has an understanding of the broader definitional nature of culture, but in an Indigenous context, the equivalent term for "culture" is "lore" (law). Anderson often begins conversation on culture by drawing upon the definition of law in Kriol.³⁰ As noted below, "Ceremony and Dreaming" are key aspects of Indigenous lore. The Kriol term "Serramoni" means (ceremony; corroboree).³¹ The definition of law in Kriol is as follows:

n. law.

1 • traditional Aboriginal law, religion and culture.

2 • law; custom; culture.

It is easy to confuse Western and Indigenous uses of the term 'culture.' Within the non-indigenous context, the term 'culture' is commonly used in a more *general* sense. Robert Koons, for example, writes that 'culture' has been typically defined by professional anthropologists in terms that "every group of human beings has a culture," which is distinguished by "a pattern of interrelated activities."³² This differs from its use in the Aboriginal (Andy's and most remote Indigenous) contexts as a *particular* reference to sacred traditional ceremony. However, in wider Northern Territory indigenous community life, the term 'culture' also refers to the kinship,

²⁸ Seiffert, 334

²⁹ Smoking ceremonies can have different meanings in different parts of Australia. (Rachel Borneman in Personal Communication with Joy Sandefur)

³⁰ Law is 'lore', in Kriol and is Anderson George's everyday language.

³¹ AuSIL Interactive Dictionary Series A-9, eds., Charles E. Grimes and Maarten Lecompte (Nakara NT: Australian Society for Indigenous Languages, 2014)

³² Robert C. Koons, "T.S. Eliot: Populist." *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 288 (December 2018): 15. For further reading on defining "culture," see: John R. Baldwin et al., *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 1-259.

law, language and etiquette. In addition, Anderson reflects on other aspects of his culture, which are embedded in skin-system law and relationship with the land;

I can still go fishing and hunting, I can still give a skin name [kinship system³³], that's part of the culture. If we have an accident in the bush, we can survive there, it's in my blood. [But it is different when it comes to sacred ceremony and] worshipping other spirits. Culture is also the skin system where I can't talk to my mother-in-law, daughter-in-law and some sisters.

Within the community, sacred ceremonies must not be talked about, upon threat of the person who ignores this rule, being 'sung' to death. As such, Anderson recognises how serious the issue is. Reflecting on this in his presentation at Surrender, he stated;

It is not easy for me to [share publicly]. I had a target on my back. It is like you are marked for dead, especially speaking [about] and exposing sacred men's business. That is why I don't take it lightly to [share] to you. I come humbly to share what God has given me.

It doesn't worry me if we are going to die. We are all going to die one day. We might as well preach the Gospel and start preaching the truth. That what I told one of the communities. If you sing me, go ahead, if it works you will send me home earlier to heaven. But if not, I will still preach the Gospel here.

Here, Anderson refers to the traditional 'Bungul' or dance and rituals, which include the application of body markings, the handing down of ancient stories orally, singing songs dancing, and talking to old people for understanding.

Place: Significant to the Story

Anderson George mainly grew up on the banks of the Roper River, but now lives in the Beswick community (also known as Wugularr). The origins of the Roper River Mission (also known as Ngukurr) are outlined in *Refuge on the Roper*.³⁴ Various other historical books tell of some of Andy's family and the history of Ngukurr community including, *We are Aboriginal*³⁵, compiled for the celebration of 100 years in 2008 since the

³³ The kinship system is a regular part of Top End Indigenous life and most Indigenous people will have a skin name (i.e. a place in the relationship system). Traditional Aboriginal societies have complex systems of kinship rules which divide people into groups such as moieties, sections and subsections, totemic groups, and clans. In Arnhem Land there are 16 different 'Skins' in the two sides of Aboriginal society, Yirritja and Dhuwa.

See Rachel Borneman and Chris Garner, "Welcome to Indigenous Ministry in the Top End: Cross Cultural Insights" (NT: NT Indigenous Ministry Awareness Network, 2013 https://www.missionsinterlink.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Indigenous_Ministry_in_the_Top_End-Cross_Cultural_Insights.pdf)

³⁴ Murray Seiffert "Refuge on the Roper: The Origins of the Roper River Mission – Ngukurr," (Brunswick East, Victoria: Acom Press, 2008)

³⁵ Peter Berthon, *We are Aboriginal: our 100 years: from Arnhem Land's first mission to Ngukurr today* (Ngukurr, N.T.: St Matthew's Anglican Church, 2008).

first CMS missionary to Ngukurr. In this book, Silas Robert's testimony from 1968 is particularly significant, as it represents a similar view to that held by Anderson, "...We don't believe as they [Old folks] did. We believe in a spiritual god, the True One. I believe in the True One, not because I'm saying this in front of you, but I'm saying this before God, from my heart."³⁶ As such, with over 100 years in the region, Christian worldview has formed a central part of Aboriginal culture and identity.

Gumbuli of Ngukurr is the story of Aboriginal elder, Michael Gumbuli Wurramara. Originally from Bickerton Island (which is in the Gulf of Carpentaria), he later moved to the Roper River Mission and became known to Anderson George. Gumbuli then became the first Aboriginal Anglican priest in the Northern Territory, where he was challenged with the tension between traditional Aboriginal culture meeting Western culture and Christianity.³⁷ Gumbuli was determined that the local response to the Gospel was authentically Aboriginal, one hundred percent Aboriginal and yet, one hundred percent Christian. Nobody experienced the worlds he faced, especially as he lived in Arnhem Land where traditional culture was still very much alive and practiced.

Seiffert wrote of Anderson's old minister, Gumbuli, twenty-four years after Anderson recalls him being in sacred ceremony. It captures Gumbuli's particular stance on 'not worshiping idols' and although Gumbuli's approach to navigating Aboriginal ceremony and Christian worship is different to Anderson's, there are some observable similarities. For example, Seiffert goes on to say that Gumbuli and his fellow leaders often faced questions of the relationship between traditional ceremonies and Christian theology. Gumbuli would say that Christians needed to be suspicious of anything which challenged God's role as Creator. However, he wanted everyone in his community to read the Bible and make up their own mind about it.³⁸ Joy Sandefur points out in her thesis that, "where there is disagreement about what should happen, there is respect and tolerance for each other's customs and beliefs rather than confrontation."³⁹ Seiffert's book won Australian Christian book of the year in 2012,⁴⁰ and Gumbuli passed on to glory in 2018.

Other Approaches to Ceremony in the Northern Territory

A consideration of other approaches to ceremony in the Northern Territory provides a larger context into which Anderson's views can be situated. A non-indigenous Australian Bishop Greg Anderson (formerly an enthomusicologist who received a PhD from Sydney University for his thesis on Murlarra, a clan song series from central Arnhem Land) proposes that in a similar way that European Christians have, over time, introduced Easter eggs and Christmas trees in Christian ceremony, and Jesus put new meaning upon the Jewish Ceremony of Passover, it is perhaps possible for some elements of Aboriginal ceremony could be practiced within a Christian context.⁴¹ This possibility, for example, has been adopted by the Warlpiri, who have taken the traditional form of their music and dance and created a new corroboree demonstrating the Bible story of Easter, performing it to the

³⁶ Ibid, 11.

³⁷ Seiffert, *Gumbuli of Ngukurr*.

³⁸ Murray Seiffert, "Pioneer pastor leaves a rich legacy," *Eternity* (August 3, 2018), <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/pioneer-pastor-leaves-a-rich-legacy/>

³⁹ Sandefur, 242.

⁴⁰ Seiffert, "Pioneer pastor leaves a rich legacy."

⁴¹ Greg Anderson, *Ceremonies in the Bible: Ola Serramoni Langa Baibul*, 31-34.

glory of God (see Warlpiri Easter Corroboree example).⁴² Yet Greg Anderson prioritises not making Christians stumble, and, for example, Anderson would not be using the didjeridu in community, as it could be a stumbling block to new Christians. Anderson is happy for the didjeridu to be used in the urban setting though.⁴³

Miliwanga Wurrben⁴⁴ who is also from Beswick but now lives in Katherine, does not see traditional ceremony as 'idol worship,' and therefore takes on a completely different point of view to that of Anderson's;

Aboriginal people traditionally did not have idol worship. They didn't bow down and put food or some sort of gift or sacrifice. We place food, water or flour at graveyard. But that's response to the person, not idol worship.⁴⁵

Views of other Indigenous Christians in the Northern Territory that align closer to Anderson's own include the Bunumbirr Marika from the "Yolngu for Jesus" group, which believe all Ceremony is worship to false gods (other spirits other than the Holy Spirit) and so, as followers of Christ we should put all that behind us. Ewan Martin from Weemol describes himself as once being "a cultural law man" but his life changed as a result when he left the "Old Ceremony" and chose "the New Ceremony - God's Ceremony." In this New Ceremony, Ewan experiences a life of love, peace and joy. He says:

I've been handed all those cultural laws to give to my sons and grandkids, but [will not pass them on as] it is not the one that we should be worshipping.⁴⁶

Anderson says Old Ewen is the last person in line. It stops with him, the ceremony doesn't pass onto his children, because he made that choice. Like Anderson, Ewan expresses a strong sense of ownership over his commitment to the God of the Bible and observes worship to Christ whilst maintaining aspects of his Aboriginal cultural heritage (such as language, fishing and hunting). Ewan's approach to Christian worshipping outdoors and in language reflects "cultural adaptation" and the "relationship between biblical truths and Aboriginal experience."⁴⁷ Ewan states;

⁴² Frank Tucker, "Warlpiri Easter Corroboree," produced by the *Australian Baptist Missionary Society (now Global Interaction)*, last modified March 16, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/21106031>.

⁴³ Rachel Borneman, Personal Communication with Anderson George 15 October 2017.

⁴⁴ Miliwanga's surname is also Sandy.

⁴⁵ Rachel Borneman Personal Communication with Miliwanga Wurrben, 2017; David Clark, "Sharing Culture Advisor: Miliwanga Wurrben," *Sharing Culture*, November 4, 2015, <http://sharingculture.info/davids-blog/-sharing-culture-advisor-miliwanga-mel-sandy>; Miliwanga Wurrben "An Indigenous View on Oneness," *Uplift TV*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG4ipqQMXql>

⁴⁶ Ewan Martin, "God's New Ceremony," *Australians Together*. 2014, Weemol, <https://www.australiantogether.org.au/churches/listen-to-indigenous-voices/ewan/>

⁴⁷ Graham Paulson, "Towards an Aboriginal Theology," *Pacifica* 19 (October 2006): 312

I like to reach out and encourage family and friends, and white fella as well. You know, how we worship is to have open services [anyone can come], out in the open air and share God's word from our lingo [language].⁴⁸

Ceremonies and Literature

People in Beswick do not turn to theological or anthropological literature for insight regarding matters of whether to participate in ceremony, or, for greater understanding of the forces at play. As an oral culture, it is generally participation (or not) that is considered important, rather than any view one holds about these events. As such, Anderson has decided not to participate in any spiritual ceremony except on one occasion when he needed to show respect to his eldest brother at a funeral, by walking alongside those doing corroboree to the coffin box.

However, there are a number of resources used by local Christians, ministers and mission workers that deal with Dreaming and Christian worldviews and with which Anderson can relate. A discussion of a couple of these texts provides context on the way in which the interaction between Christian and Aboriginal culture is navigated in the Northern Territory, and provides an opportunity to showcase where Anderson sits in relation to such texts.

God's Dreaming is an illustrated book produced by a team, including Anderson's friend Roger Latham, who organised several Indigenous and non-indigenous people to come together to participate in the project.⁴⁹ Reflecting on the book, Anderson explains, "Many blackfella talk about dream time stories but this book is about God's dreaming stories, how God created this world and the fall of man." One participant is Norman, a Cairns Pentecostal Pastor and gallery owner, and an Aboriginal man who similarly upholds a Christian God as Creator. Norman's position was put into public display when he made the choice not to display a painting of the Rainbow Serpent, because of the "conflict between the Aboriginal image of the rainbow serpent and the Christian understanding of a creator figure."⁵⁰

The representation of "Fallen Angels" in *God's Dreaming* is of particular interest to Anderson. Aboriginal people have a keen interest in 'angels' because of the centrality of the supernatural worldview. In the culture with which Anderson is familiar, the supernatural worldview helps to explain or solve the cause of situations, including illnesses. For Anderson speaking from a Pentecostal Christian perspective, the supernatural world also explains the presence of evil or 'fallenness' in the present world. Anderson reflects;

As I grew up, I was taught that Satan was kicked out of heaven, with one third of the angels. I have now found Biblical references to back it up, Luke 10:18 and Isaiah 14:12-15. Also, the Bible stories of Eve being tempted by the snake, and Jesus tempted by the devil, shows Satan and demonic spirits [are] active on this earth.

⁴⁸ Martin, "God's New Ceremony."

⁴⁹ To read more about the origins of this project, see: "About", God's Dreaming, accessed June 7, 2019, <http://www.godsdreaming.org/about>

⁵⁰ Sallie Anderson, "Rejecting the Rainbow Serpent: An Aboriginal Artist's Choice of the Christian God as Creator," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (2001): 292.

God's Dreaming encourages Aboriginal Christians to make a choice, as summarised in the question formed by Anderson himself, "who are you putting first in your life. Will it be the one true God?" This question has been very influential in Anderson's life, and is reflected in the title of this article.

Ceremonies in the Bible by Northern Territory (non-Aboriginal) Anglican Bishop Greg Anderson presents what the Bible says about ceremonial practice in biblical times and how these practices might be applied in today's context. It uses accessible language and was made available online in both English and Kriol. When speaking about this text, Anderson prefers Rachel sharing it orally by reading it out to him. Anderson speaks in Kriol and prefers to listen than to stop and read. When Anderson does read, he prefers to read English. Indigenous people from Anderson's cultural context prefer a story, chatting around the fire, more than reading a book.

The booklet presents what the Bible says about ceremonies, both in biblical times and today. Additionally, in terms of Aboriginal ceremony, the booklet explains that Aboriginal people have different views. That is, while some say God gave Aboriginal people culture (ceremony), others believe that God "wants them to leave those ceremonies when they change their lives and follow Jesus."⁵¹ Some Aboriginal people state that "they don't know where those ceremonies come from."⁵² The booklet also reflects Anderson George's view on idol worship which asserts that we need to use what God tells us in the Bible about other ceremonies to help us think about Aboriginal ceremonies.

In line with the views of Bishop Greg Anderson, Anderson George asserts that the Bible is clear that, "we must not worship anything except God. So, this means we must not join in with any kind of ceremony that worships another kind of spirit or where people think that ceremony is making things grow." Anderson George draws upon a scriptural reference in Isaiah 44:6-20 which informs his understanding of what he deems 'idol worship,' and in so doing, reveals his adherence to the Holy Spirit;

I was asking the Lord; the Holy Spirit reveal to me the scriptures of Isaiah 44:6-20. This passage can be summarised as, 'Idolatry is Foolishness'. [It] speaks about manmade objects, about the gold and the silver. But the [verses] that really captured my eye, are where it talks about cedar and the pines, the carpenter made the image out of wood. And how they bow/fall down to the block of wood.

Not a big idol like buddha, etcetera, but the objects are light weight...they do not know we are worshipping idols. In the ceremony we kneel or lie down to the block of wood, as the object is there next to them. The object is to be carried as a protection for them. They cannot see it because their ears and heart has not been open[ed].

Academic literature: Establishing an Indigenous Theology

A brief consideration of various academic reflections on the relationship between Christian and Aboriginal faith traditions provides a context within which Anderson's personal views can sit. Pentecostal theologian, Amos Yong, for example, draws links between the reception of Pentecostalism in oral-based cultures, which are also often characterized by their pneumatic spirituality. Extrapolating upon his observation, Yong

⁵¹ Ibid, 28.

⁵² Ibid.

details that, “amidst cosmological worldviews populated by many spiritual entities, not to mention layers of spiritual realities, Pentecostalism’s pneumacentric religiosity interfaces more organically with indigenous beliefs, practices and sensitivities.”⁵³ Thus, Anderson’s worldview cannot be fully grasped in isolation from his specifically Pentecostal Christian experience, driven via the Spirit’s work in its interpretation of the Bible, along with his cultural preference for the oral tradition and emphasis on the spiritual realm. As discussed, the spirit-realm is intimately woven into the fabric of Anderson’s worldview and provides a vernacular through which he navigates and articulates his experiences of the Christian faith as an Aboriginal person.

Anderson’s reflections in this paper paint a general picture of his unique position on his navigation of both Aboriginal and Christian cultural heritages and while, for some, Anderson’s *rejection* of many aspects of Aboriginal culture might be uncomfortable, it is important to note that Anderson does not *disclaim* his Aboriginality altogether. As alluded to previously in the paper, Jirrbal artist, Norman, presents a similar position, rejecting what he considered an “essentialised concept of Aboriginality” when presented with a painting of a rainbow serpent by another Aboriginal artist.⁵⁴ Motivating this rejection was Norman’s strong convictions of a Christian God as creator, and thus, he considered it his right as gallery owner to decide on the inclusion or rejection of certain artworks. Yet, in a similar vein to Anderson, while Norman rejects what was perceived to be “the appropriate representation of Aboriginal spirituality,” similarly he did not *disclaim* his Aboriginality altogether;

Unfortunately, some Aboriginal people have been told they have to leave their culture behind when they become Christians and live like Europeans. This is not true. When a person anywhere in the world becomes a Christian, they re-examine their lifestyle and maybe reject some aspects of their culture if it does not line up with their faith.⁵⁵

Similarly, Anderson’s rejection of ceremony needs to be helpfully situated in relation to a nuanced anthropological view of indigenisation involving both redemption *and rejection* of culture, along with his right to self-determination to decide for himself how his Aboriginality and (Pentecostal) Christian faith are navigated.⁵⁶

Indigenous Elder Graham Paulson presents an alternative position to Anderson’s, providing a rationale for an Aboriginal Theology that “can hold together...both Indigenous and Christian identity.”⁵⁷ That is, while Anderson’s (and Norman’s) Christian faiths inform their response to their Aboriginal spiritualities, Paulson presents an Indigenous cultural framework as the starting point through which the Scriptures (and Christian faith) are subsequently interpreted. Importantly however, Paulson’s paper helpfully identifies the inherent difficulties of promoting an Aboriginal Theology, the first being the pervasive assumption that “Christianity is inextricable from its Western cultural frameworks” with the resulting implication being that an adherence to the Christian faith

⁵³ Amos Yong, “Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics: A Difficult Relationship or Promising Convergence?” *Fuller Studio*, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/evangelicals-pentecostals-and-charismatics/>

⁵⁴ Anderson, “Rejecting the Rainbow Serpent: An Aboriginal Artist’s Choice of the Christian God as Creator,” 291.

⁵⁵ Norman quoted in Anderson, “Rejecting the Rainbow Serpent,” 295.

⁵⁶ See also: Kirk Dombrowski, “The Praxis of Indigenism and Alaska Native Timber Politics,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4 (2002): 1062-1073.

⁵⁷ Paulson, 310.

undermines the coherence of Indigenous cultural expression and identity.⁵⁸ The second impediment is the notion that Christian spirituality “undermines [Aboriginal] dignity and self-worth.”⁵⁹ Paulson argues that so long as this view is upheld, Christianity is simply no more than a “demeaning ‘whitefella’ religion,” requiring indigenous people to leave their culture on the basis that it comprises an “inferior spirituality.”⁶⁰ As such, Paulson importantly establishes a precedent for the legitimacy of the “Aboriginal Christian,” and makes a case for indigenisation as a phenomenon involving both the redemption *and* rejection of culture⁶¹ – a central characteristic of Anderson’s lived experience.

Anderson’s Change since Conversion

Anderson is clear that any change in him has not been imposed, but has occurred, “from the Holy Spirit convicting [him], when [he] asks, ‘can I worship you Father God? Can I worship you and worship my ceremony?’”⁶² He reflects;

I am not denouncing my culture or my identity, but of worshipping ceremony, my Dreaming. I turn my focus from worshipping ceremony to worshipping God. I will always be an Aboriginal person. I will die as an Aboriginal person.

This decision is controversial, and causes him conflict within various relationships;

It affects me, even when I was a young Christian, as a young pastor. Being criticized by the preaching ministry I have been doing... it's a journey that I have learnt to do. Not only that, I have been criticized by my own family, my brothers and sisters [in] debate about sacred ceremony and God.

Even by my own full blood family I have been called a white man, 'bible basher.' I have been criticized by [those] calling me everything under the sun. I am not trying to make myself a white man. I will always be a black man. I will always serve Jesus. It is Jesus Christ the son of the living God, it is him who I am preaching about. I am not preaching about Anderson. I am preaching about Jesus Christ; he is the author and finisher of our faith. He is the one who saved us. That's why we are all here, because of Jesus who came and died on the cross 2000 years ago. He came as a man and died for our sins and rose again. That's the only reason why.

It should be emphasised that Anderson, like other Aboriginal Christians, is at pains to articulate that his acceptance and practice of a Christian faith should not imply that he is trying to be a ‘white man.’ Rather, he

⁵⁸ Ibid, 310 - 311.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 311.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 312.

⁶² Anderson has presented his testimony as the Spirit’s work which interprets the Bible. As such, by situating his worldview within the context of his Pentecostal cultural tradition, the article moves beyond an argument *purely* about culture to that which is directed by Anderson’s active discernment of the spirit/s.

demonstrates his agency in his unique articulation of faith and navigation of two spiritual traditions, grounded within a particular cultural context, without renouncing his Aboriginality. While Anderson's particular position, some have met with disagreement, Anderson's story helpfully alludes to the diversity of opinion, spiritual identity and experience in the Aboriginal Christian world of the Northern Territory and provides a forum for further discussion about matters of 'legitimacy' and 'authenticity.'

The Challenge

For Anderson, continuing his walk in the revelation of the Gospel is about ensuring that he is faithful to the Christian message, not only for Aboriginal people but for all Christians. He states;

I like what the speaker at Surrender was saying, "a lot of people like to make Him Saviour. But no one wants to make him Lord of their life." This is very true for Indigenous people. No one wants to make Jesus, Lord of their life. We need to put aside the differences, not just for others but for Indigenous people, and to worship the one true living God, and serve him and only him.

On Closing the Gap

Anderson's opinion in relation to 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in reconciliation terms, is;

Everyone needs to reconcile to God first and foremost in humility (including putting Jesus in our life) and then we can be reconciled to each other and the land.⁶³ As Indigenous Christians we need to stand up on behalf of our non-Christian family. We want to see kingdom of God come! Ceremony is a blockage to see the kingdom come.

Anderson notes that from his perspective, much of the political will to 'close the gap' in the non-Christian context, ends up doing the opposite and does not empower Aboriginal people. Anderson continues;

People throughout Australia think learning culture, [finding identity], which includes learning traditional ceremony, is the answer to the Indigenous issues today. Munanga [Whitefella, non-indigenous] give money to black fella to make TV traditional cultural programs. This is how non-Christians think they are closing the gap. But to me from my point of view as a Christian Indigenous man, I see it as putting us in bondage. This blocks the way for the Christian gospel to go out, [our] true identity. Bondage is all the things of this world. People will give money for culture but not Christian things. Like a friend who is a Christian and wanted to start a drug and rehab place, but because he was teaching Christian values, the government would not support him. The government wanted him to run it, how [they] wanted it. This [is] like bondage.

⁶³ Here Anderson cited 2 Chronicles 7:14 "*If my people will come and humble themselves, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal them and heal their Land.*" I think God will then work wonders through us as a nation.

Anderson concludes;

I want to thank our Lord Jesus Christ and thank the Holy Spirit for helping me. I want to give all the glory to our Heavenly Father. What I have shared with you in this paper, I do not share lightly. I will always be an Aboriginal person, even with this view on sacred ceremony. I could die for it, but God's truth, the Gospel, is worth preaching about. God's word is alive and active. We serve an awesome, almighty God. Are you making Jesus, not just your Saviour but your King? God bless you.

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