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Religion, “Non-Religion” and Indigenous Peoples on the 2011 Australian National Census

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ABSTRACT

The 2011 Australian National Census revealed trends in the religious identities and affiliations of Australians that demonstrated wide cultural and religious diversity amongst the population, including a dramatic growth in the percentage of respondents who ticked the “no religion” box. This might suggest an increasingly secularised population, although this conclusion is not as straightforward as it may seem, particularly in light of the growth of religions other than Christianity and evidence that many “non-religious” people identify as “spiritual”. One surprising result, which calls for more investigation and analysis, is that a higher percentage of indigenous people declared themselves as having no religion than the general population. This article examines the overall results of the 2011 census on religion and non religion in Australia and then offers some preliminary interpretations of the census responses of Australian Aboriginals in light of two pilot studies conducted by the authors in 2013: one in the urban setting of Mount Druitt, near Sydney and the other in the remote village of Ampilatwatja around 325 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

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The Australian sociologist of religion, Gary Bouma (2006), claims that for Australians religion must be a low-temperature phenomenon. He argues that in Australia, religion is not something to get overly enthusiastic about. This cultural aspect of Australian identity will always prevent Australia moving towards a US model of religiosity. As Bouma states: “It is not characteristically Australian to trumpet encounters with the spiritual like some American televangelists” (Bouma, 2006 p. 2). Following this observation, Bouma describes the Australian soul in terms of religion and spirituality as “a shy hope in the heart”. For this phrase, he was influenced by Manning Clarke’s comment about the ANZAC spirit as “a whisper in the mind and a shy hope in the heart”. As Bouma (2006, p. 2) explains about religion and spirituality in Australia:

A shy hope in the heart aptly expresses the nature of Australian religion and spirituality. There is a profound shyness – yet a deeply grounded hope – held tenderly in the heart, in the heart of Australia. [...] Australians hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively about it. The spiritual is treated as sacred. What is held protectively in the heart is sacred; the sacred is handled with great care. Not all things that evoke awe and wonder are loud and noisy, brassy and for sale.

This shyness does not reflect a weak indication of the religious and spiritual vitality throughout Australia, but it suggests a complex picture of what it is to be “religious” or “non-religious” in a society with many different strata, including the dynamic and fluctuating religious identities of Aboriginal peoples. This article analyses the contemporary situation of religion in Australia by reporting on the findings of the 2011 Australian Census on religious identity, first by giving background to the census itself, followed by a description of religious vitality in the broad Australian context as demonstrated by the census and concluding with an analysis of the dynamic religious adherences as reported by Australia’s indigenous peoples and as analysed through two pilot studies conducted by the authors in September and October 2013.

Background to the “Religious” Question on the Australian Census

Australia had its first national census in 1911. It included a question that was then seen by Britain as too intrusive: one on religion (ABS 4102.0, 2013). Since then the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has provided data on the religious landscape through the years because, it explains, “Religious affiliation provides a useful indicator of aspects of the cultural diversity of Australia’s society” (ABS, 2011). On the 2011 census, Question 19 asked: “What is the person’s religion?” The question allowed respondents to select from the nine most popular religious groups in Australia (Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, Presbyterian, Buddhism, Greek Orthodox, Islam, Baptist, Lutheran), write an answer in a box marked “Other” or select “No religion”. Data was recorded and compiled for a wide range of officially recognised religions if the respondent wrote the name of the religion in the “Other” box. If a respondent marked “Other” and entered “agnosticism”, “atheism”, “rationalism” or “humanism”, these were counted as a sub-category to the “no religion” total (and the population experts, 2013).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics defined “religion” in the following way:

For the purposes of the law, the criteria of religion are twofold: first, belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and second, the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief (ABS 2011).

The ABS then clarified the meaning of this definition by noting that non-theistic religions, like Buddhism and Confucianism, can be regarded as religions because, in the case of Buddhism, “it contains elements of belief in supernatural principles as well as canons of conduct” and with respect to Confucianism, although it “involves no overt belief in the supernatural ... it

provides a moral code for its adherents” and “it contains elements of belief in supernatural principles.” Marxism, on the other hand, is not a religion because it is better described as a “political philosophy based on a coherent set of beliefs, without any supernatural or spiritual component.” The category “no religion”, although it could be “described as above and outside the scope of the religion topic” was “included in the census for practical reasons and to make the classification more useful” (ABS 2011).

Details of the classifications of religious groups can be found in the *Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups* (ASCRG), first produced and published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1996 with subsequent versions appearing in 2005 and 2011. The 2011 report of the Australian Bureau of Statistics explains that the first edition of the ASCRG was developed after “extensive research of Australian and overseas literature”, and was “supported by information and advice from academics and religious experts” (ABS 2011). The ABS had for the last census a list of 1806 recognised entries.

From its inception, the ASCRG classified religious groups at three levels: the broad group, the narrow group and what it calls the “Religious group”. It begins at the most detailed level with the “Religious group”, of which the 2011 version of the ASCRG identified 115. It then moves to the “Narrow group”, numbering 32 in the 2011 edition, before arriving at the “Broad group” of which seven are listed: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Other Religions and No Religion. These do not correspond to the named groups on the 2011 census, but they are used by the ABS to analyse the statistical data and to organise responses falling outside the main religions listed on the actual census questions. The statistical calculations are then used to interpret social, religious and cultural changes and trends within the broader Australian society.

On census question number 19 about religion, four specific examples of “Other” religions are provided: “Salvation Army, Hinduism, Judaism, Humanism”. The ASCRG places “Salvation Army” as a classification under both the “Narrow Group” category and as a “Religious Group”, both of which in turn fall within the “Broad group” Christianity. Hinduism, on the other hand, is listed under all three categories simply as “Hinduism” with no sub-divisions or sub-categories. Most “other” religions that are classified on the ASCRG are not mentioned on the census question. For example, the category “Australian Aboriginal Traditional Religions” is classified under the broad theme “Other Religions” and is listed on the ASCRG as both a “Narrow group” and a “Religious group”. Chinese Religions are also named as a “Narrow group”, but they are further sub-divided to fit into the classification “Religious group” under the separate categories: “Ancestor Veneration, Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Religions, nec (not elsewhere classified)”. The ABS explained this method of classification was determined “on the basis of similarity in terms of religious beliefs, religious practices and the cultural heritage of adherents”. This classificatory structure links related groups according to what the ABS calls “their intrinsic characteristics”. In addition, the greater the number of respondents naming another religion resulted in that religion being

sub-divided into more detailed and separate categories, whereas the fewer the number of respondents resulted in the religion being fitted within more general classifications. While the ABS lists 91 Christian sub-groups as part of its more specific categorisation at the “religious group” level, including 15 Pentecostal sub-groups, all Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish sub-groups are categorised into one broad category only. For example, if someone puts “Sunni”, “Shiite” or “Sufism” on the form, the entry would have been recorded as Muslim only (ABS 2011).

Clearly, those responsible for constructing the questions on religion on the Australian census and those who created the subsequent classifications, assumed, without overtly stating it, that the category “religion” is closely associated with Christian terminology. This is confirmed when religion is translated as belief in a supra-normal being or experience that is manifested in organised religion to which some individuals choose to belong, or they are “non-religious”. Even the sub-categories related to “non-religion” are couched in organisational terms when they are linked to “humanism” or “rationalism”, which are seen loosely as philosophical movements at times express themselves in organised structures.

What Can the Census Tell Us?

Australia saw its religious homogeneity changing after the Second World War as post-war migration and conversion to new religious movements transformed the cultural, religious and ethnic profile of Australian society. These patterns have significantly diversified the religious landscape of Australia. And it is in 2001 that for the first time, we no longer have two religious groups accounting for 50% of the population, but three (Bouma, Cahill et al., 2011). Bouma (2006, pp. 64) explains:

Most of Australia’s religious groups are more ethnically diverse than they were in 1947. This is true of Australian Catholics who were distinctly Irish until the post-1947 waves of migration brought Italian, Maltese, Yugoslav, Polish, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Baltic, Lebanese, Indian and Sri Lankan Catholics to Australia. ...Anglicans and Uniting too are now more ethnically diverse. Australian Muslims trace their origins to more than sixty-five nations.

With regard to Christianity, Australia has not only seen an increase in its diversification, including the growth in Eastern Orthodox and Assyrian Apostolic adherents, but it has also witnessed a decline. For example, in 1947, Anglicans represented 39 per cent of the population. As listed in Table 1, in 2011 they had dropped to 17.11 per cent and are no longer the largest religious group in Australia. Catholics, on the other hand, thanks to migration movements, have become the largest group with 25.29 per cent of the population. What is also worth noting is that Australia is becoming less and less a Christian country, from 88 per cent of the population in 1947 to 61.15 per cent in 2011.

In 2011, Muslims represented 2.21% of the population whereas in 1971, it

was only 0.2%. Today, Buddhism encapsulates 2.47% of the population but was only at 1.1% in 1996. Non-Christian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam have grown without attracting public and secular group notice from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. The secular Australian government, while managing migrant intake (in 2011, 30.8 per cent of the Australian population was born overseas), always believed that when religious migrants came to Australia, they would simply lose their religious beliefs. The secular government never thought that these migrant groups would add so much to the Australian religious landscape (Bouma, 2006).

The census data thus indicate that Australia is becoming less Christian and that non-Christian groups are growing. Further to this, it is important that Australia, on the same line as being more non-Christian, is also, paradoxically, becoming less religious. Indeed, the “no religion” category has grown from 6.7 per cent of the population in 1971, to 15.5 per cent in 2001, and to 22.3% in 2011. It is worth mentioning that in 1971, when the census introduced the specific instruction “if no religion, write none”, there was an immediate increase in those ticking this box from 0.8% in the previous census to 6.7% (ABS 2013). The ABS notes:

From this time, reporting no religion has increased at an average of 3.9 percentage points per decade, with the sharpest increase (6.8 percentage points) between 2001 and 2011. (ABS 4102.0, 2013)

ABS (4102.0, 2013) also reported that Australians born in China represented the ethnic group that is the least religious (63%). Those born in Japan (53%) and Macau (45%) were the second and third group. The rate for people born in Australia was just over 23%.

We cannot conclude from census data that people who leave Christian churches necessarily remain religious and go to other religions. For example, as found in research in the UK, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) discovered that the relatively small growth of the holistic milieu (where spiritual people not attached to a religious group meet) does not compensate for the larger decline of the congregational domain. Indeed, the fall in numbers of Christian attendees is much higher than the growth of the spiritualities and other new religious movements. These non-Christian or non-mainstream Christian groups do not necessarily provide a spiritual refuge for all dissatisfied Christians – many of these church leavers become nonreligious. Nevertheless, there are church leavers interested in other religious groups and this adds to Australia’s religious diversity. As Bouma and Hughes (forthcoming) mention, the fact of declaring to be of “no religion” on a census form does not fully equate to being irreligious or not interested in spirituality. What it clearly states is the lack of identification with a religious group. In this catch-all category we can have people who engage with religion and people who do not at all (Bullivant, 2012).

Lim, MacGregor and Putnam (2010) discuss the heterogeneity of the “no religion” category based on survey research in the United States. They claim that it is unclear who the religious “nones” are with respect to their stance vis-

à-vis religion. To help with their research, they created two sub-categories. The *liminal nones* are people who identify themselves as “none” at one time but might claim a religious preference at another time, and the *stable nones* are those who are constant when they identify themselves as having no religion.

The stable nones, who consistently select no religious preference, are secular on all measures of religiosity we examined. Although many of them are not atheist or agnostic, there is no evidence that they are privately religious or spiritual. The liminal nones also differ significantly from the people who consistently identify with one of the organized religions, not only in their church attendance but also in all other aspects of religiosity, including religious beliefs and the salience of religion in life. There is little evidence that the liminals are particularly spiritual either. In other words, we found little indication that they are active “seekers” who pursue their religious passions privately outside religious institutions (Lim, MacGregor and Putnam, 2010, p. 614).

Even if in terms of identification there is a decline of religion in Australia, this does not mean that religion exercises a decreasing influence within society as a whole. Marion Maddox (2011) recently demonstrated that, even in secular liberal societies such as Australia, where a strong division between church and state is supposedly definitive, religion has still a part to play in politics: religion is shown to be a significant factor in voting decisions, and religion is intruding more and more into the public sphere. As she remarks: “God’s political profile is growing in Australia while her worship declines” (Maddox, 2011, p. 288).

Further to this decline of identification with religion, there is also in Australia a growth of religious diversification and religious revitalisation, especially among Pentecostals, Buddhists, Muslims and neo-pagan groups. With this increased vitality, comes increased differentiation and thus increased competition between religious groups. Further, spirituality, as a more personal approach to the religious phenomenon, has grown over the last few years. Unfortunately this aspect is not well captured in the census. People who claim to be “spiritual”, would be classified as “Religious Belief, nfd”, which is the same category where we can find people who answer “many”, “a mixture”, “yes”, “World Religion”. Within Christianity, Hughes *et al.* (2012) find that the fact that a growth of 85 percent between 2001 and 2011 of people who reported to be Christian without nominating a denomination is a strong indication of a movement away from “organised religion”. This confirms the emergence of the post-dogmatic religion as explored recently by Riis (2012). As new generations of believers have been taught to question religious authorities, more and more people attempt to establish their own beliefs rather than affiliate themselves with an established dogma. This has led to a growth of subjectivized forms of religion in the non-institutional field (Davidsen, 2012).

This diversity is also expressed in the recognition of new religious movements in the “Other Religions” category such as the Baha’i, Chinese and Japanese

religions, nature religion and spiritualism and in a large sub-category of “Other Religions” called “Miscellaneous Religions”. This last group includes the Church of Scientology, Eckankar, Rastafarianism, Satanism, Theosophy (which includes Anthroposophy), Jainism and Zoroastrianism. There is also another category called “Religious Groups, nec” in which all other religions that are not in the list above are lumped together. In this list, we can find 80 groups such as the Aetherius Society (Flying Saucer Group), Gurdjieff, Jungian, The Grail Movement of Australia and the Unification Church. Even if 64,390 people put Jedism as a religion in 2011 (ABS, 2013), along with other hyper-real religions (Possamai ed., 2012), these are coded as “not defined” and thus not identified as a religion in the census classification.

Contemporary Religion and Indigenous People in the Census Data

From 1996 to 2006, there was a decrease in indigenous people claiming to be part of an Australian Aboriginal Traditional Religion (from 7,274 to 5,209). In the 2011 census, we find a reversal of this trend, with a growth rate of 35% from the 2006 Census. The total is now 7,017 people, which is still less than the 1996 Census, and overall it represents just 1.28% of the total indigenous population. In the 2011 Australian Census, 548,370 people identified as Australian Indigenous. Among this grouping, after Christianity (62%), the religious nones (those that ticked “no religion” as opposed to simply not answering the question) are the highest (non)religious group in the Census, that is 24% (slightly higher than the national average (22%). This group had a growth rate for 2011 of 41%, which capitalised on an earlier growth rate of 44% in 2006 (see below).

Among Aboriginal respondents, adherents to Islam showed an important growth (62%) in 2006, that is an increase from 622 people in 2001 to 1,010 in 2006. The growth has continued in 2011, but at a far smaller rate (13%) to reach a total number of 1,142. The numbers of Indigenous peoples claiming to be from the Baha'i faith (n=163) and Hinduism (n=131) are very small, even if there has been a constant growth for the former group. Buddhism had a strong peak in 2001 (157% growth) and has since continued to grow steadily (2,268 Indigenous people in 2011). Among Aboriginal peoples, adherence to Buddhism had the highest growth rate (57%) for 2011. With regard to Aboriginals claiming to be Christian, there has been an increase from 252,222 people in 1996 to 290,619 in 2006, with a leap to 341,735 in 2011. This steady growth, however, does not tell the whole story. In 1996, 71.45% of the indigenous peoples claimed to be from a Christian background, but the proportion declined to 62.33% in 2011. Even if there has been a growth of Christians in terms of the amount of people, there has been a decrease in terms of percentage. This is explained by the fact that there has also been a growth in absolute numbers of people who identify themselves as indigenous from 1996 (352,997) to 2011 (548,373).

Table 1: 2006 and 2011 Australian Religious Censuses

| RELIGION | 2006 | 2011 |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Buddhism</i> | 2.09% | 2.47% |
| <i>Christianity:</i> | | |
| Anglican | 18.53% | 17.11% |
| Assyrian Apostolic | 0.04% | 0.05% |
| Baptist | 1.58% | 1.64% |
| Brethren | 0.12% | 0.10% |
| Catholic | 25.56% | 25.29% |
| Churches of Christ | 0.27% | 0.23% |
| Eastern Orthodox | 2.71% | 2.62% |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | 0.40% | 0.40% |
| Latter Day Saints | 0.27% | 0.28% |
| Lutheran | 1.25% | 1.18% |
| Oriental Orthodox | 0.16% | 0.19% |
| Other Protestant | 0.28% | 0.28% |
| Pentecostal | 1.10% | 1.11% |
| Presbyterian and Reformed | 2.97% | 2.79% |
| Salvation Army | 0.32% | 0.28% |
| Seventh-day Adventist | 0.28% | 0.29% |
| Uniting Church | 5.66% | 4.95% |
| Christian nfd(b) | 1.56% | 2.19% |
| Other Christian | 0.17% | 0.17% |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>63.23%</i> | <i>61.15%</i> |
| <i>Hinduism</i> | <i>0.74%</i> | <i>1.28%</i> |
| <i>Islam</i> | <i>1.70%</i> | <i>2.21%</i> |
| <i>Judaism</i> | <i>0.44%</i> | <i>0.45%</i> |
| <i>Other Religions:</i> | | |
| Australian Aboriginal Traditional Religions | 0.03% | 0.03% |
| Other Religious Groups | 0.52% | 0.78% |
| <i>No Religion(c)</i> | <i>18.48%</i> | <i>22.3%</i> |
| <i>Other religious affiliation(d)</i> | <i>0.67%</i> | <i>0.81%</i> |
| <i>Religious affiliation not stated</i> | <i>11.09%</i> | <i>8.55%</i> |
| | | |
| | | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>100.00%</i> | <i>100.00%</i> |

Source: ABS 2006 and 2011 Census

Non-Religion among Australia's Indigenous Peoples

In the 2011 census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who claimed to have no religion or did not state a religion was 188,409, or approximately 28% of the total indigenous population, which as of June 2011 was estimated at 669,000 (ABS 3238.0.55.001, 2013). (These figures were adjusted in 2013 upward from the actual census total to take into account underreporting of indigenous peoples on the census.) Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner note that the "No Religion category is a container that can hold many different

meanings, some of which can even be incompatible and contradictory” (Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner, 2013 p. 95). Those constructing the census compile information by adding numbers of individual answers and the only way of nuancing the questions for those who do not fit into the top nine religions is by adding a further clarification that can be evaluated statistically. As we saw, those answering “other” could add that that they were agnostic, atheist, humanist, rationalist or some other recognized religion, including Australian Aboriginal Traditional Religions. Among indigenous people, only 1% added any clarification to the “other” or “no religion” classification. This suggests that we are unclear about how those who checked “no religion” interpreted the category, which lends a certain urgency towards listening to Aboriginal peoples themselves (Onnudottir, Possamai and Turner, 2013, p. 95).

In order to find out more about how Aboriginal peoples interpreted “religion” and “no religion” on the census, in September and October 2013, the authors (Cox and Possamai) investigated “non-religion” among Australian Aboriginal peoples through two pilot studies: one in the urban context of Mount Druitt, a suburb in western Sydney and the other among selected groups living in the small village of Ampilatwatja, located around 325 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The pilot studies were intended to guide later research on this issue and to help us refine our research questions and approaches. Initially, we followed three broad areas of questioning through a conversational or dialogical method with individuals and groups who agreed to be interviewed: 1) how they understood or interpreted what Westerners have called “religion”; 2) if the people we interviewed distinguished being “religious” from being “non-religious”; 3) how modernity and Christianity have affected their understanding of “religion”. This line of questioning was intended to test two hypotheses: 1) Aboriginal people traditionally are religious in every aspect of life and do not separate what in the West we call “religion” from “non-religion”; 2) Modernity and Christianity have so distorted traditional ways of understanding “religion” that now many Aboriginal people are thoroughly secularised and thus can be called “non-religious”.

The hypotheses that formed the background for the pilot studies we conducted were intended to test common, but often unchallenged, assumptions, which are promoted by many scholars, that indigenous peoples make no distinction between the sacred and the secular and that they are all entirely religious (in a Western sense), although, it is asserted, they would never refer to themselves in those terms. For example, the African theologian and scholar of African religions, John S. Mbiti (1969, chapter one) famously claimed that “Africans are notoriously religious”. Or, the Methodist leader and scholar of Yoruba religion, E.B. Idowu (1962, p. 5), in his important study, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, wrote, “The real keynote of the life of the Yoruba ... is their religion. In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them”. Such claims are not limited to scholars of African religions. In his book *An Introduction to Maori Religion*, James Irwin (1984, pp. 5-6) observed: “Maori people do not see the sacred and secular as separated but as parts of the whole. Theirs is a holistic view of life.” And in her *Introduction to Primal Religions*, Philippa Baylis (1988,

pp. 2-3) argued that everything in primal societies, including work, family relationships, eating, sexual activity and so on are all “religious”. E.G. Parrinder, who originally studied West African religion and became a leading scholar in the comparative study of religions during the latter part of the twentieth century, in his important and widely read book *African Traditional Religion* (1974, p. 27), noted that in Africa “Religion is not just the province of one particular class, though there are specialists in ritual. Nor is it only for those who feel piously inclined, though there are differences of temperament. But religion enters into the life of every individual.” In a similar vein, the leading scholar in the methodology of religions, J.G. Platvoet (1993, p. 22), when writing about African religions, observed that “African Traditional Religions ... are co-extensive with their societies; religion is an undifferentiated part of social life.”

Our initial interviews, which are still in the process of being compiled and analysed, already are pointing in the direction of some preliminary conclusions with respect to our hypotheses:

- 1) The high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island respondents on the census ticking “no religion” interpreted the question as relating to Christian denominations such as Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or other organised religions, like Islam.
- 2) Religion and Tradition/Culture were interpreted as being different. For example, when discussing religion and tradition, one elder drew lines on the ground in the red dust. He said: “This is my father’s father’s father; this is my father’s father; this is my father; this is me; this is my son” (Interview, Cox and Possamai with Elder A, Ampilatwatja, Northern Territory, Australia, 9 October 2013).¹ The transmission of culture and traditional authority from generation to generation was not interpreted by this elder as religion. In rural settings, this suggests that if a person answered no-religion, this did not mean a rejection of tradition or the authority of orally transmitted cultural values and practices.
- 3) Some urban Aboriginal Christians rejected the idea that their church could be classified as being a part of “religion”. This interpretation was confirmed by one urban interviewee, who was a member of an Aboriginal Church in Mount Druitt. He indicated that he had ticked “no religion”, because his church cannot be equated with “religion”. Religion, he explained, is of this world and hence Satanic (Cox-Possamai, Focus Group Interviews, Group Participant A, Butucarbin Aboriginal Corporation, Hebersham, near Mount Druitt, New South Wales, 19 September 2013).²
- 4) Other urban respondents indicated they were “spiritual” but did not go to church, suggesting parallel developments with the wider Australian population (Cox-Possamai Focus Group Interviews, Butucarbin Aboriginal Corporation, Hebersham, near Mount Druitt, New South Wales, 19, 20 23 and 25 September 2013).

¹ The name of the elder is withheld to protect confidentiality.

² The name of the participant is withheld to protect confidentiality

- 5) Numerous urban interviewees referred to being cut off from their traditional roots, largely as a result of the stolen generation, where up until around 1970 Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and placed on government and church missions. Many of the urban interviewees were second or third generation urban dwellers whose parents or grandparents formed part of the stolen generation. This might further add to the “no religion” category by reinforcing that tradition was not interpreted as religion (Focus Group Interviews, Butucarbin Aboriginal Corporation, Hebersham, near Mount Druitt, New South Wales, 19, 20, 23, and 25 September 2013).
- 6) Our preliminary findings suggest that “no religion” for some indigenous respondents in urban settings meant lack of community, a sense of self-autonomy and relativistic attitudes towards social and ethical standards, which suggests that the number of secularised urban Aboriginal people is increasing, that is, they clearly fall into the “no religion” category.

As we have seen, census data provide a valuable source of knowledge when trying to understand broad religious trends in Australia, but unfortunately it is not perfect, as it does not capture hybrid approaches (e.g. being both Christian and involved in Aboriginal Traditional Religion at the same time), as the question only asks for one answer. Nonetheless, the results of the 2011 census and our preliminary findings from the pilot studies undertaken in Mt Druitt and Ampilatwatja equally dispute the colonial construct of what an “authentic” Aboriginal person is. We are learning that even in rural areas the contemporary everyday life of Aborigines is no longer restricted to their traditional spirituality and Christianity. Overall, according to census data and confirmed in part by our field studies, Aboriginal people are more prone to be a religious “none” than non-indigenous people.

Implications of Research into Non-Religion among Indigenous Australians

The growth of the “No Religion” category among indigenous Australians has implications beyond problems associated with the Australian National Census and should shed light on the developing academic field of “non-religion studies” (see Quack, 2011; Bullivant, p. 2010 pp. 109-24). Lois Lee (2012, p. 131), one of the innovative thinkers in this new area explains that “non-religion” is “anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion”. The category “non-religion” is frequently associated with debates over the secularisation process in the West or it has been linked to controversies surrounding the “new atheism” and cognitive approaches within the sciences of religion. Often overlooked in this field of study are indigenous populations. The most elementary, but absolutely fundamental issue when considering non-religion as a conceptual term for understanding indigenous Australians relates to what is meant by “religion”. This is because non-religion can only be understood in terms of what it negates.

Explanations as to why Australian indigenous people are increasingly self-identifying as non-religious are aided by challenging the longstanding, but uncritical, and oftentimes naïve assumptions that indigenous peoples do not

separate sacred from secular activities and that religion is entirely a Western concept. As we have seen by reference to Mbitii, Idowu, Irwin, Baylis, Parrinder and Platvoet, it is widely asserted among academics that traditional, small-scale societies make no distinction between religion and non-religion in the sense that every activity of life possesses some spiritual significance. It is also pointed out that indigenous populations almost never have a word in their vocabulary which equates to the Western idea of religion. These commentators on indigenous religions all agree that religion is embedded in the social milieu within indigenous societies. What is less clear is exactly what it is that is embedded.

We are discovering both by reference to our analysis of census data and from our pilot studies that indigenous peoples, like people everywhere when they are behaving religiously, always have and continue (although in different contexts and circumstances) to distinguish objects that possess special power and therefore need to be respected, such as sacred mountains, trees, rivers, pools or particular instruments with mythic and ritual significance from objects that do not possess such power. When indigenous groups engage in rituals, just as in non-Aboriginal ceremonial contexts, they know that they are entering a time and space which is different from ordinary time and space. These factors suggest that, although no word for “religion” may be found in most indigenous languages, the concept of separating special objects from other objects and denoting sacred from non-sacred space and time is no more foreign to them than it is to practitioners of the so-called world religions.

These conclusions justify the longstanding academic claim that indigenous populations practise indigenous religions, which can be and have been studied in detail. If religion constitutes a particular research area among indigenous peoples, this confirms that non-religion can also constitute a field of study within indigenous societies. In this sense, our analysis of “non-religion” among indigenous peoples in Australia promises to enlarge the field both of the academic study of Indigenous Religions and also Non-Religion Studies. By arguing that religion and non-religion represent complex phenomena within a host of groups in diverse cultures, we hope to have contributed to correcting the imbalance that has dominated the early days of Non-Religion Studies by demonstrating that the concept non-religion has important implications for understanding not only the history of and contemporary movements related to “religion and non-religion” in Western, industrialised societies but equally among indigenous populations.

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