ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016

**"The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts"**

PLENARY SESSIONS

PLENARY SESSION C:

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY - DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

International Perspectives on Religious Pluralism: Challenges, Limits, and Possibilities – (Australia)

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Traveling in a fried-out combie
On a hippie trail, head full of zombie
I met a strange lady, she made me nervous
She took me in and gave me breakfast
And she said

Do you come from a land down under?
Where women glow and men plunder?
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover

These are the lyrics of a song written in 1981 by an Australian band, 'Men at Work'. It tries to capture several things…the difference of this 'Land Down Under', the humour that undergirds the lyrics, and the freedom that the landscape evokes in the human spirit, reflected in our art and music, and the sense of ease, hospitality and inclusivity that have (not always) defined the national temper. Given the limitation of time, I wanted to sum up from this last sentence, the demographic and socio-political dimensions of Australia, which I shall explore briefly further. I first want to offer a thumbnail sketch of our history and demography and suggest three (?) themes from this 'Great Land of the Holy Spirit' that represent both the contribution which Australians can make to the global scene and interreligious matters, including Jewish-Christian relations.

Europeans set out in the 17th century to verify the existence of 'Terra Australis', the hypothetical and mythical 'great South Land' that was shrouded in mystery on maps of the 15th century and later. The Portuguese navigator, Pedro Fernandez de Quiros (1565-1614), with the blessing of Pope Clement VIII (of Clementine Hall fame in the Vatican) and King Philip III set out in 1605 to

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discover the lost 'Australis del Spiritu Santo', the 'Great South Land of the Holy Spirit'. His voyage of discovery was unsuccessful and eventually disastrous, but that's another story. While Asian traders probably sighted if not landed on Australian soil in earlier centuries, it was left to the Dutch, Willem Janszoon, on 26 February 1606 (in the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, called the place 'New Zealand' and judged 'there was no good to be done there'![1]) and ten years later, Dirk Hartog (who set foot on the west coast of Australia without knowing that it was part of *Terra Australis*, and nailed an inscribed pewter plate on a cliff top to record his visit. That plate is now in Amsterdam in the Rijksmuseum).
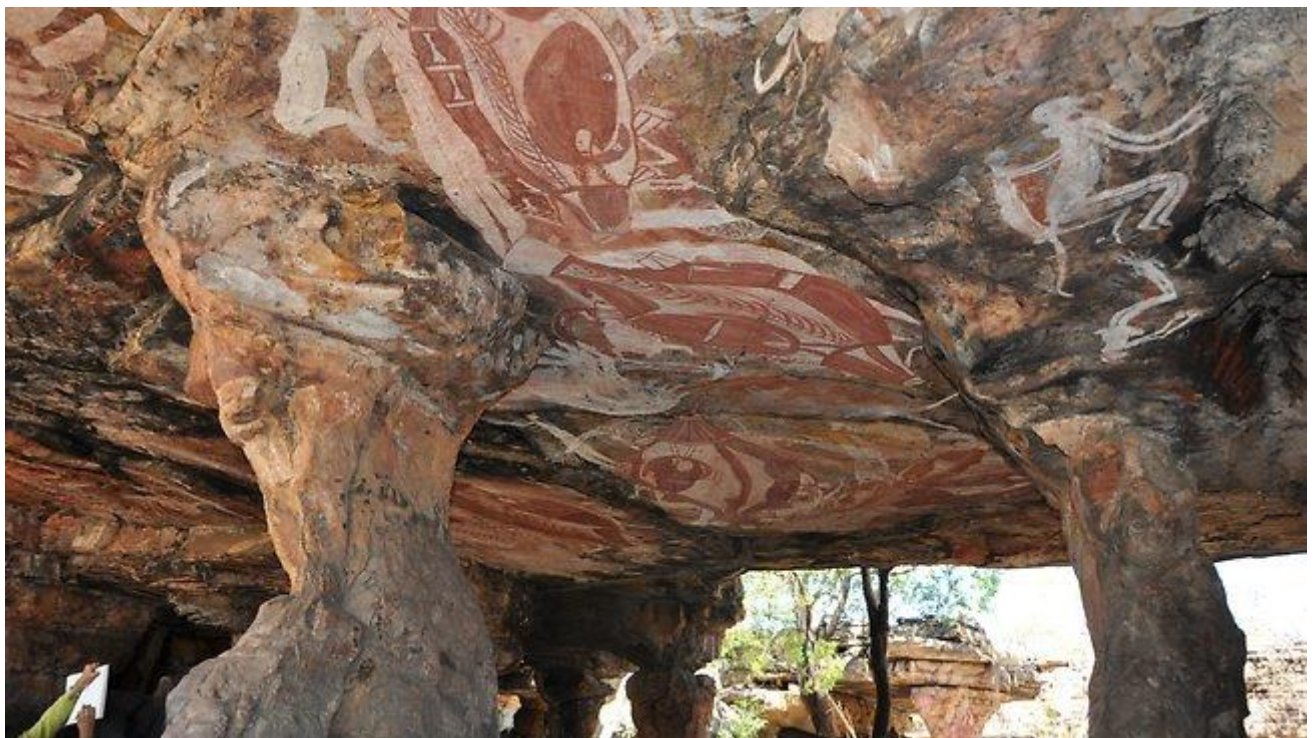

Figure 1. *28000 year old Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter[2]*

The most significant historical moment from the European perspective was the establishment of a colony on the east Australian coast by James Cook on 29 April, 1770. He believed, like all European adventurers to other lands before him, that this was 'Terra Nullius'—unoccupied, virgin country. In 1788, Capt. Arthur Philip also claimed this land for England and raised the British ensign in Port Philip Bay after the first fleet sailed into Botany Bay. The fleet bore 1336 people and over half (543 male convicts; 189 female; 22 convict children; most of these were Irish Catholics; 8 Jews) were convicts transported to the colony for a variety of crimes (from the petty to the more serious) for a period of 7 or 14 years, or for the term of their natural lives.[3] Sydney town was later established as a convict colony, and a place where the English could prosper.

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[1] Mark Peel, *A Little History of Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2006), 12.

[2] http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/finding-puts-aborigines-among-arts-avant-garde/story-fn9d3avm-1226398075663.

[3] Mollie Gillen, *The Search for John Small, First Fleeter* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1986); John *Cobley, The crimes of the First Fleet convicts ([2nd] ed.), (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1989).*

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However, Australia was not England; the climate was very different in a world that seemed upside-down and judged by one early European visitor as a place that could not even support 'the miserablest People in the world'.[4]

What soon became clear to Philip, the colonists and convicts, was this land already had inhabitants. In fact, as we now know, the first Australians had been on this land for over 60,000 years; some are even pushing this date back further, to 100,000 years. In other words, Australia is arguably one of the oldest continuously inhabited land on this planet. Its history did not begin with the first European sightings or settlement. The oldest piece of rock art in existence, the 28,000 years old charcoal drawings from the Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter in south-western Arnhem land in the Northern Territory (Figure 1) and the 6,000 BCE Kakadu rock painting of the 'lightening God' (Figure 2), attest to this.
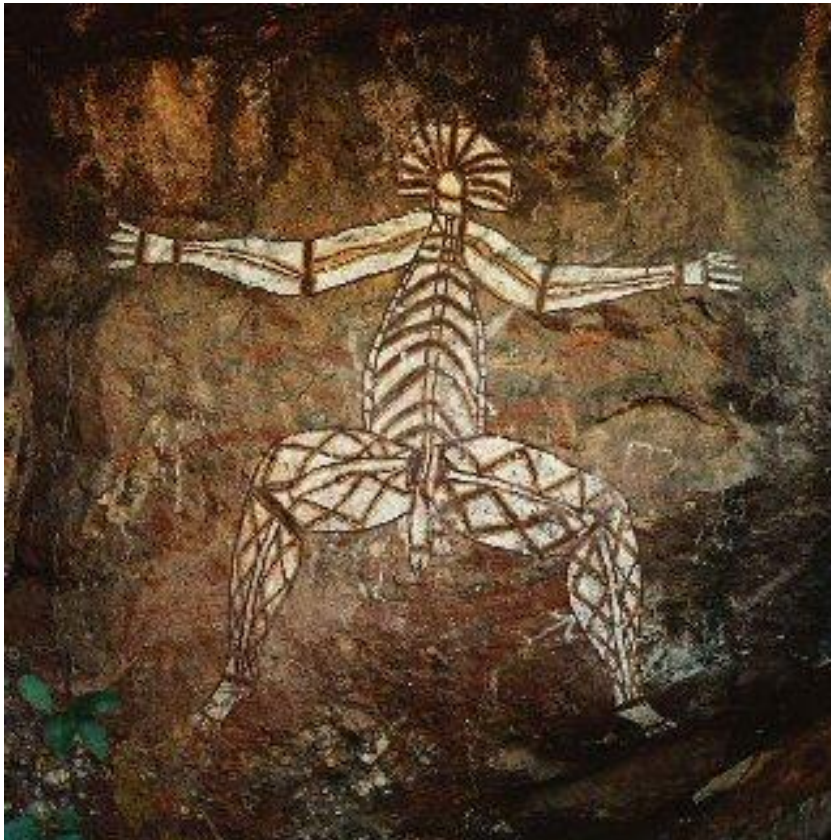

Figure 2. *Lightning God, Kakadu c. 6,000 BCE*[5]

The relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians from those 'founding' years until the present has not always been harmonious.

Clarke summarises Australian history since Europeanisation:

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[4] Peel, *Little*, 12.
[5] http://www.ancient-wisdom.com/aborigines.htm

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> In many ways, Australia defies description, and its history before and after the arrival of Europeans is rich and multilayered. It is the oldest country…Its native people did not write but had evolved a highly specialized way of life that permitted them to exist in, understand, and manage their own countries for millennia before the arrival of the whites. Modern Australia has its foundations in these two cultural strands, and the unresolved tensions between them continue to bedevil a community that still has not attained a reconciliation between black loss and disempowerment and white obduracy and refusal to acknowledge the reality of invasion and theft.[6]

This struggle for reconciliation is one of the dark undercurrents of our history, and it continues today. While I do not have the space to explicate the reason for this, there is another side to our story that, in a way, expresses what has happened since European settlement. The predominant convict narrative of early settlement distracts from the 19th century establishment of other 'free' settlements (like Adelaide in South Australia) where people (usually from the British Isles) migrated to Australia for a new life as farm labourers and housemaids. Nevertheless, the dominant religious grouping in this period was Christian, typified by tension between adherents of the main denominations, Anglicans—the strategists and colonial powerbrokers—and Roman Catholics—over-represented in the convict gangs. Such tension has generally ameliorated and ways of reconciliation with the First Australians has continued with their formal recognition in the census in the 1960s, the landmark 'Mabo' case which recognised indigenous Australians as the rightful owners and inheritors of a land no longer deemed 'Terra Nullius' in 1992 and the present move to include them explicitly in the Australian Constitution. More pertinent to this paper is the growing desire to appreciate their culture and religion.

The fact that Australia was established by Europeans, predominantly English, though not exclusively, as a convict jail it defined the future characteristics of Australia: its secularity and the terminus of mobility. Secularism gave it a distinctly secular flavour. Religion was not at the fore, though religious adherents were part of its population.

> The established religion of the colony was Anglican Christianity; one-third of the convict population that was Catholic and predominantly of Irish extraction was denied priests and freedom of worship until 1820. However, the majority Anglican convict population also scorned institutional religion, and Governor Macquarie (1810-1821) was compelled to order 'compulsory church attendance for convicts in government service, and enforc[ed] laws against the profanation of Sundays by arresting loiterers and charging publicans who traded during hours of worship'.[7]

Against the background of this potted history of early European Australian history sits the realisation that, apart from the First Australians, every other person who lives in Australia is either a first generation migrant or the generational offspring of migrants or early settlers. According to the 2011 census, almost a half of the present population was born overseas or had

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[6] Frank G. Clarke, *The History of Australia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), xi.
[7] Carole M. Cusack, 'Religion in Australian Society: A Place for Everything and Everything and Its Place,' *Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand)* 13 (2005): 29 (article runs 28-45).

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at least one overseas born parent.[8] In my own case, my great-grandfather was an Irish Catholic and my great-great-grandfather, an English Jew who helped establish the first synagogue in Adelaide. Waves of migration (the original settlement, after the two World Wars, the aftermath of Vietnam, conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East) are responsible for a vibrant, multi-cultural and religiously diverse country. Australia is arguably the most multi-cultural and multi-faith country on this planet.[9] Its secularity and growing cultural diversity have enabled it to be a place of welcome, strangeness and freedom in which formal religion represented by the mainstream Christian denominations do not determine the political agenda and can co-exist with a multiplicity of religious groups and spiritual expressions. This is evident in the 2011 census.[10]
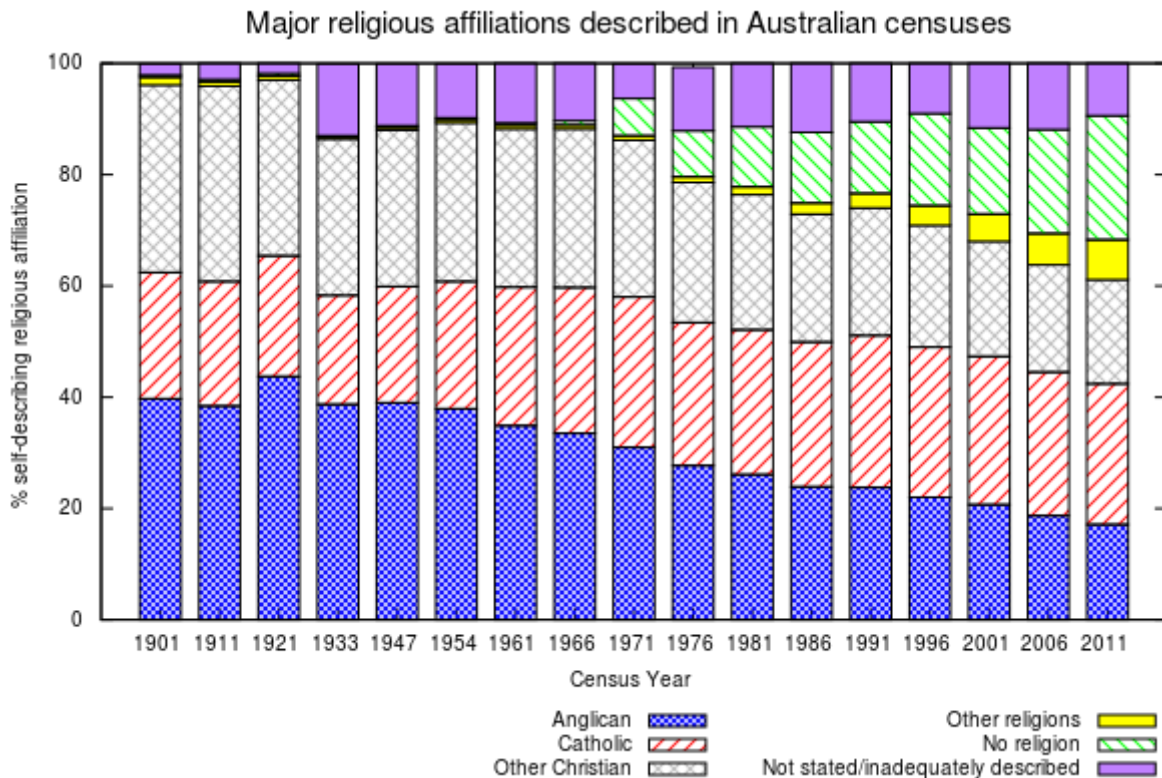
European settlement in Australia occurred for reasons other than religious and its governance occurs without religious institutions or symbols shaping or determining its characteristics. This is what is meant by 'secularisation'.[11] Social commentators have identified secularisation and multiculturalism as the two main cultural shapers since the late twentieth century.[12]

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[8] http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2071.0Main%20Features902012%E2%80%932013

[9] Cusack, 'Religion,' 42.

[10] Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37138532

[11] Cusack, 'Religion,' 32; Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 107.

[12] Cusack, 'Religion,' 28; Gary D Bouma, 'From Hegemony to Pluralism: Managing Religious Diversity in Modernity and Post-Modernity,' *Australian Religion Studies Review* 12 (1999): 7-27.

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While on the one hand there exists religious fundamentalism and extremism and on the other a growing number of Australians declaring themselves in the most recent census as 'no religion' there is clear evidence that Australians display a religious surge of openness to the transcendent and expressions of spirituality that can't be captured by these two extremes.[13] According to the 2011 census, 68% of the population identified themselves with one of the Christian denominations, 2.4% as Muslim and 0.6% (= 97,335, but probably higher to 120,000: 90% live in Melbourne and Sydney) as Jewish.
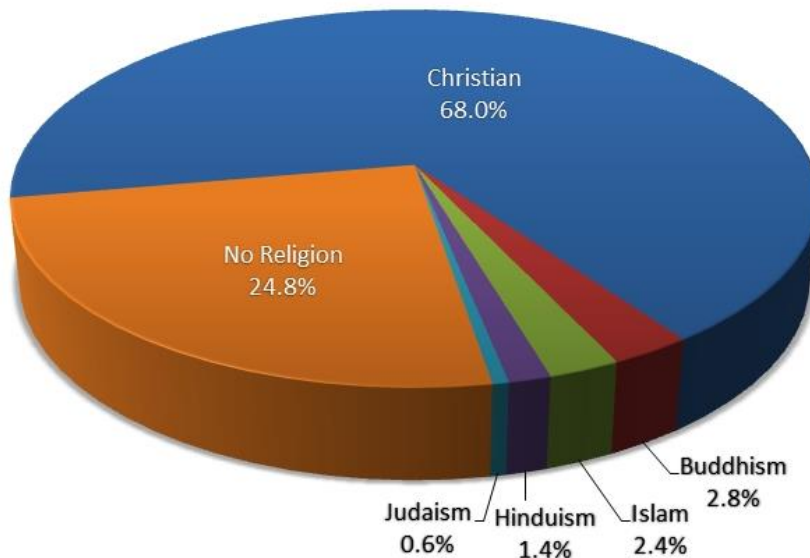
Religion & No Religion (2011 Census) [14]
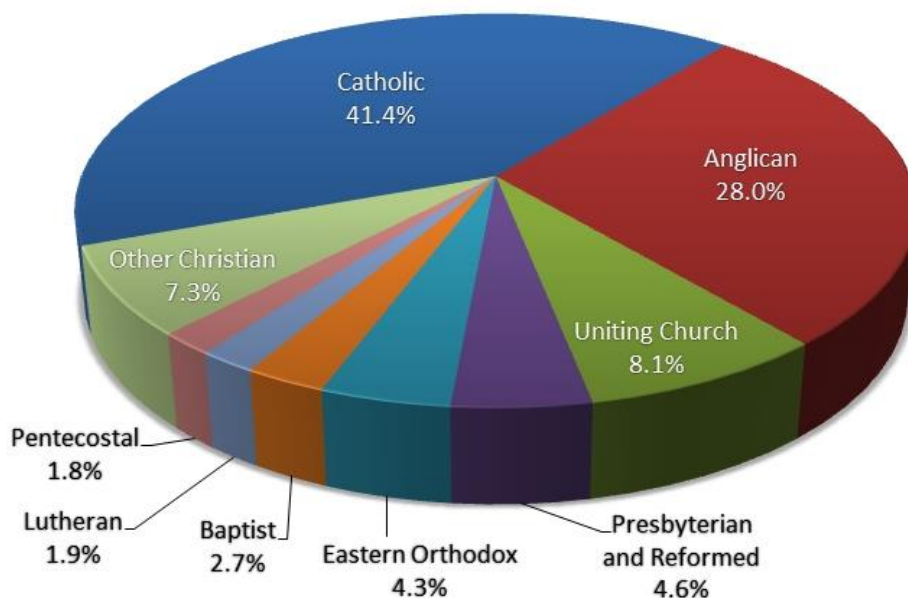
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[13] See, for example, Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning, With or Without Religion* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2016).
[14] http://teaminfocus.com.au/religion-in-australia-statistics-from-the-2011-census/

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Major Religious Groupings in Australia (2011 Census) [15]

Historians Mark Peel and Christina Twomey summarise the essential traits that characterise Australians and Australia:

> This is a place marked strongly by aspirations that may not seem immediately revolutionary but are no less interesting for that. It was and is a highly mobile society, a population full of migrants and movers and sojourners who have had to work out—with more or less success—the practical tolerances that allow people to live together. Far from the centre of the world, Australia was and is an anxiously experimental society, a place of invention and innovation, emulation and nervous introspection, a place where some people could forget where they came from, while others made the best of themselves and still others longed only to return elsewhere. It was and is a place where some hierarchies—faith, caste and birth, for instance—seemed less important and could be relaxed, while other—especially race—were fashioned with detail exceeding almost every other nation. [16]

If I were to summarise how I would characterise my national historical and cultural context that would assist amity and cooperation, and reflected in my experience within inter-religious and

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[15] http://teaminfocus.com.au/religion-in-australia-statistics-from-the-2011-census/

[16] Mark Peel and Christina Twomey, *A History of Australia*. (Palgrave Essential Histories. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xiv.

inter-faith dialogue and cooperation, the social researcher Gary Bouma is helpful. He summarises the religious and spiritual dimensions of Australians this way:

> On the basis of my studies of the way religious groups have come to and settled in Australia, I argue that there is a quality to Australian religious and spiritual life that can be described and that is peculiar to Australia. This Australian quality is not described by a creed that most or all Australians accept. That would be a far too cerebral, too verbal an approach. Nor is Australian religious and spiritual life characterised by a particular form of worship or specific spirituality. Rather my claim is that there is a distinctive Australian quality to the way religion and spirituality are constructed and negotiated by Australians. This quality is summed up in Manning Clark's phrase: 'a shy hope in the heart' (Thornhill 1992: 172). Sinclair (2004: 284) draws a similar conclusion about the Australian imaginary, which is described as 'characterised by a distaste for display—whether aesthetic or affective'.[17]

Bouma further characterises some of the religious and spiritual patterned dimensions of Australians in terms of:

1. *Intensity*: tendency towards being subdued, laid back
2. *Expressivity*: tendency towards the shy, withdrawn and not exuberant
3. *Cyclicity*: tendency for participation to occur early and late in the lifecycle
4. *Consistency*: low level of consistency between belief and practice is accepted
5. *Proximity*; the transcendent is expected to be distant, localised and diffuse.
6. *Social location*: religious groups are expected to be on the margin, not central

I offer above an idiosyncratic interpretation of our historical context and draw upon Australian social researchers. There are others who would offer other interpretations of the Australian experience and emphasise more strongly the way Australia has responded to the current refugee crisis and asylum seekers, especially those who have sought to come to Australia by boat.

Ten Themes for Inter-Religious Conversation

In conclusion and not-with-standing this important, necessary and balancing emphasis, I offer 10 insights which a consideration of the Australian perspective can bring to inter-religious conversation. Each of these conversational themes deserves an essay in themselves.

1. Naming the 'dark side' of our history
2. Affirming 'deep' secularity that allows for openness and inclusivity
3. Questioning the 'normal'
4. Reconceiving the 'conventional'
5. Respecting the 'other'
6. Showing compassion
7. Being humble (that 'land-down-under' perspective)
8. Deepening optimism

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[17] Gary Bouma, Australian *Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32.

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9. Attending to the Soul
10. Easy going, with a capacity to be self-reflective and soft-hearted. This is summed up in our humour and spirit of light-heartedness