Chapter 9

The Ties that Bind: The Importance of Religion and Community to the Non-religious

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Introduction

Religion and Aboriginality would appear to be inseparable, especially in North Queensland. The combination of the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'non-religion' in one sentence sparks confusion and incredulity amongst academics and Aboriginal people alike. Religion – particularly Christianity – is a central part of life for Aboriginal people there. On first impressions, many people do not see Aboriginality and non-religion as compatible. But the number of Aboriginal people who identify as having no religion is growing across Australia (Possamai, this volume) and, as the earlier chapters in this book demonstrate, the decrease in Aboriginal religiosity is more than just a fluke picked up by the Census. After being initially sceptical concerning Aboriginal non-religion, many people begin to name friends and acquaintances who are atheists or agnostics, or others who are nominally Christian but do not practise their religion.

The North Queensland city of Townsville has a population of 217,898, 7 per cent of whom identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, and 20 per cent of whom identify as having no religion. As a regional centre in North Queensland, the city is home to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from traditional owner groups and from nearby rural and remote communities, as well as from cities and towns further afield. Townsville's Aboriginal residents have come from a number of former missions, from former government reserves and from other cities. Thus, a diverse range of religious contexts is represented in this relatively small city. Townsville is approximately 1,000 km from the state capital,

Brisbane, and much further from Australia's urban centres of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. It is this physical distance from centres of power that attracted me to Townsville as a field site for my research on Aboriginal activism. In the course of my research on political activism, though, I found myself spending a lot of time in churches. Activist group meetings and community meetings were held in the local Aboriginal and Islander Catholic church, St Theresa's. The organising of protests usually involved ringing local priests and preachers to invite them to attend. All events were opened with prayers, sometimes to the 'Ancestors' but always to the Christian God, even though about a third of the activists with whom I worked identify as atheists or agnostics. These activists have a sharp understanding of the role of the church in the colonisation process. They have personal or family memories of abuse at the hands of missionaries in Aboriginal communities. Their non-religion is a part of their political identities; they are non-religious partially in protest against this historical relationship between the Church and Aboriginal people.

In this chapter, I use ethnographic examples from 2007 to 2014 to illustrate the practice of non-religion by some Aboriginal activists in North Queensland. I also explore the tension between the social importance of religion on one hand and the personal abandonment of it by some people on the other. In the context of Townsville's Aboriginal community[1], having no religion is potentially alienating. This is not because a person will necessarily be

[1] I use the singular term 'community' cautiously, because I do not want to indicate any kind of homogeneity. There are two recognised traditional owner groups in Townsville, the Bindal and the Wulgurukaba. Aboriginal people in Townsville also come from a range of other cultural groups, some from nearby and others from around the continent. There is also a substantial Torres Strait Islander population, and their relationship to religion is different to Aboriginal peoples', an issue which is beyond the scope of this chapter. I use the term 'Aboriginal community' because it is the term used by the people with whom I worked.

stigmatised for a lack of religious beliefs, but because religion and community life are so closely intertwined. I will draw on ethnographic research to explore the importance of religion to Aboriginal people in political, family and community contexts. This chapter demonstrates that non-religion is an identity that some people adopt and actively perform, but it also explores the messiness of that identity. Even when people hold no personal religious beliefs, they are bound to religion because of their ties to the community and to their families.

Fieldwork in a Regional City

The data for this paper come from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Townsville, beginning in 2007. The most concentrated period of fieldwork ended in 2009, but as I continue to live and work in Townsville it is difficult to say that I have ever 'left the field'. Though I have stepped back from the initial, intense practice of fieldwork, I continue to practise what could be called 'home work' (see Muetzelfeldt 1989; Munthali 2001; Nader 1972; Tresch 2001; Voloder 2008). Following the anthropological tradition, I worked as a 'participant observer' with a focus on Aboriginal activism. For this paper, 'Aboriginal activists' are those people with whom I worked on addressing inequalities faced by Aboriginal people. In most cases, activists identified themselves as such, though there were a few individuals who did not like this label. Nonetheless, they were committed to changing the status quo and worked through a variety of measures that I define as activism.

I researched with an open commitment to my research participants, who were the activists with whom I worked. I made it clear to them and to others that I was not simply a researcher but was myself an activist working in solidarity with them. I operated as what Shannon Speed (2006) calls a 'critically engaged activist researcher', that is, from a position which, because of its commitment to critical theoretical analysis, is beyond simply identifying with research participants. This engaged researcher role was not always an easy

role to play (see Petray 2012a). My field work was complex and messy and rich and full of data – it was what Smith (2005) calls 'tricky ground'. As a result of working so closely with my research participants, I collected a wealth of data that was not directly related to the topic of activism. My close relationship to the field, and to my research participants, also means that I am inextricably incorporated in the research, as the examples below illustrate. I am not claiming insider status; as a young, visibly white, American woman, I am demographically very different from most of my older, Aboriginal activist participants. But I use myself as a research tool, framing my analysis in terms of my experience in the field. In the interests of maintaining positive relationships with my research participants, and between Aboriginal community members, I have used pseudonyms in this chapter and tried to avoid any details that would identify individuals.

Though I did not explicitly research it, religion appeared regularly as a theme in my fieldwork. Protests and community meetings were opened with prayers and various events were held in churches. I attended a number of 'community meetings' – meetings concerning specific issues, announced publicly through the local Indigenous radio station, through email lists and through Indigenous services. These meetings were always held at St Theresa's Church, the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Church in Townsville. It does not look like a typical Catholic church; it is not a grand cathedral with a high spire, but a low-set building with a round roof. It has rows of plastic chairs instead of pews and the front of the building is adorned with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and artwork. It does bear some similarities to other churches, with its religious iconography and its pulpit, but the feel of the space and the flexibility of its layout lend the church a community function as well as a religious one. St Theresa's was central to the community despite there being an array of alternative spaces. Large meeting spaces are available at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Centre, at community centres around Townsville, at school halls and so on.

But these secular spaces are rarely used by the Aboriginal community in the way that the church building is.

The church is not just the venue for community meetings at irregular intervals. St Theresa's also accommodated meetings of the Human Rights Group, the activist organisation with whom I worked throughout 2007 and 2008. It was used as a space for formal consultation with the government. For example, I attended a consultation at St Theresa's about the Indigenous Wages and Savings Reparations Scheme (field notes, 21 September 2007). This was the Queensland Government's response to the Stolen Wages campaign, which drew awareness to the many Indigenous workers who never received the wages they had worked for up until 1972 (Kidd 2006). Despite the government's having netted the current equivalent of millions of dollars from Indigenous workers, the Reparations Scheme offered eligible workers a maximum payment of $4,000 each. In response to undersubscription to the Scheme, the government consulted Indigenous communities around the state on what to do with the remaining sum of $20 million. This official government consultation took place in St Theresa's Church in Townsville, as did other similar consultations; and they were opened and closed with prayer, at the suggestion of community leaders who judged that the atmosphere was hostile and needed soothing. Thus, even in research about activism, religion emerged as a key topic.

Religion's Legacy in Queensland

Religious institutions played an integral role in the subordination of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. Christianisation was an early goal, as expressed, for example, by the Assistant Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip, James Dredge, who said that the Christian religion was the 'only infallible plan for effecting their civilization' (in McGregor 1997: 12). As McGregor (1997) points out, Christianity was not at the forefront of all colonists' minds,

but it was seen as an important step in the civilisation of Aboriginal peoples, even when it followed other more secular 'advances'. By the 1830s, however, popular belief in the 'Doomed Race Theory' suggested that many people thought Aboriginal people could not reach the same levels of 'civilisation' as European colonisers even with Christianisation. The debates then shifted to the most humane way to let Aboriginal people 'die out' (McGregor 1997: 12–14). Should they be Christianised to give them a chance at salvation? Or was it kinder to let them maintain their traditions as they headed towards extinction? Christianisation won out and missions became an important agent in the colonial process.

The relationship between religion and Aboriginal people is thus very complex. The Church, as an institution, is implicated in the colonisation of Australia. It has a tarnished history that cannot be ignored. The current inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people stem, in large part, from its historical mistreatment of them (see Brady 2007; B. Hunter 2007; E. Hunter 2007; Kidd 1997). Religious doctrine underpinned the Doomed Race Theory; 'divine intervention' was commonly given as a reason that the 'inferior races' should die out in the presence of 'civilised Europeans' (McGregor 1997: 15). In the mid-1800s, in an effort to 'smooth the dying pillow' (in the words of South Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1860; in Nethery 2009: 74), state governments and religious institutions established segregated reserves and missions. It was during this period that the northern part of Queensland was settled by colonists. Aboriginal missions were set up, with varying degrees of success, by Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical Lutheran, Assemblies of God, Methodist, Christian Brethren, Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist churches, along with a few run by the Moravian Mission and the Salvation Army (State Library of Queensland 2014). Some of these missions were short-lived, but others were well-established and officially recognised under Queensland's Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897. It was the goal of these missions to 'Christianise' Aboriginal peoples in

Queensland (and in other states, following different legislation) for their salvation. In effect, the missions were often harsh, with strict regulations on Aboriginal freedoms, limited food and resources, and punishments meted out for speaking language or practising customs – as were also their state-run counterparts, the Aboriginal 'reserves' (see Kidd 1997; Thomson 1989).

However, many Aboriginal people did become Christian, maintaining faith in their beliefs despite the historical injustices perpetrated by their churches. Activists recognise the influence of religion on Aboriginal society. For instance, Andrea says:

> There has to be some recognition that I grew up in a Christian culture. North Queensland, I mean, Christianity is pretty huge. At the same time, I think people would be surprised how much influence the Muslim religion has had on Aboriginal people up here too. Not just Aboriginal people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But on the main, Christianity. I mean, we live in a society with rules that are influenced by the whole Christian philosophy. (Interview, 11 November 2008)

Some people are even nostalgic for the days of the missions, when Aboriginal communities were largely free from alcohol, drugs and violence. In an interview with an inmate at the Townsville women's prison, I was told that during the mission era there was at least work for everyone and the community was stronger overall. Since the missions' demise, social problems have compounded. The interviewee, an Aboriginal woman from Cape York, acknowledged that there were problems with the mission era, but on the whole she missed it. She said that things deteriorated when the mission left her community and many people want it to return to being under the control of the Lutherans (interview, 10 March 2008). This sentiment is echoed by Thomson's (1989) collection of oral histories about Yarrabah Mission, which experienced 'troubled' years following the changes in its management from mission to state government to Aboriginal council.

Later, many churches were important players in the struggle for Aboriginal equality. The 1950s, 60s and 70s, in particular, were marked by strong partnerships between Aboriginal activist groups and religious institutions. Activists in Townsville speak fondly of the local Catholic priest of that time, noting his contribution to their fight for equality (field notes, 13 November 2007). Religious individuals and groups were important in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), a coalition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, whose most notable campaign was in support of the 1967 Referendum[2] (Taffe 2005). In 1972, Eddie Koiki Mabo and Harry Burrnum Burrnum Penrith established a 'Black Community School' in Townsville (Petray 2012b). Though its establishment was allowed by the Queensland Education Department, the school was offered no support. In the absence of government support, the school was given space in a local Catholic church in which to hold classes. This partnership, and others like it, are indicative of the role religion plays in struggles for social justice.

During my fieldwork, activists spoke about both their positive and negative relationships with religion. Of the 20 or so activists with whom I worked most closely, about a third were openly Christian, another third openly non-religious and the remainder did not speak about their religious beliefs. They often attempted to work with local churches (as

[2] In 1967, 90.77 per cent of Australian voters endorsed two changes to the Australian Constitution which would remove some entrenched racial inequalities. The first allowed the Commonwealth to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a responsibility which had previously been in the domain of state governments. The second included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the census for the purposes of determining electoral boundaries. Popular misperceptions of the 1967 Referendum are that it gave Aboriginal people the right to citizenship or to vote, but the important outcome was that it was the first time 'White Australia' showed such overwhelming support for Aboriginal inclusion.

discussed further below) but the strong partnerships that activists say characterised the 1960s and 1970s were not a feature of activism at the time of my research. Those activists who were religious did use their church networks for sharing information and drawing on resources and skills, but the partnerships were informal. Because, historically, the relationship between Aboriginal people and religion has been both good and bad, and because the current situation is fairly neutral, activists can select the historical narrative about religion which suits their personal beliefs. Activists who observe a religion justify their participation by focusing on the positive aspects of the relationships between Aboriginal people and the churches in the fight for Aboriginal equality. At meetings where protests were organised, for example, activists regularly mentioned the role that Father Matt, a non-Indigenous Catholic priest, had played in local political activism since the 1960s and 1970s and suggested him as a person to approach for access to resources like venues and personal networks (field notes, 13 November 2007). Non-religious activists, on the other hand, to partially explain their lack of faith, refer to the historical role of the church in the perpetration and perpetuation of injustice. Andrea (one of the participants in the research) points to religious inequalities as one driver of her activism:

> Because I generally don't like to see religion oppressing people, and so in that way I sort of really rejected it, because I see how women in particular are suppressed in their behaviour and ideas. And I'm not particularly pointing to any particular religion, but Christianity is just as guilty as what we understand, sort of, the Muslim religion to be. (Interview, 11 November 2008)

Performing Non-religion

The activists with whom I worked were usually outspoken about their religious, or non-religious, beliefs. This can be understood as a performance, following Henry's (2012) use of the concept as self-conscious activity. Rather than being something which is distinct from

everyday life, Henry (2012: 14) finds that 'in certain contexts the performative mode appears to dominate the very practice of everyday life'. Activists are conscious of the public pronouncement of their religious belief or non-belief. From the beginning of my fieldwork, I heard a number of phrases repeated time and again, suggesting some level of 'rehearsal' of the discussion of religious beliefs. Some participants openly stated their religious activity, citing it as a central part of their healing from past injustice and trauma. Francine, for example, became a self-described born-again Christian when she began looking after her aging mother (who had mental health issues), because faith was something she 'could really hang on to, to anchor myself' (interview, 28 March 2008). The church was a key part of Francine's 'healing journey', a framework through which to deal with the trauma of being removed from her mother at the age of five (interview, 28 March 2008). Some activists who are religious use the framework of church organisations to enable their political activism. For example, an activist group I worked with had a bank account under the umbrella of a church group that one member belonged to. Others activists were openly non-religious. Many of the latter group were also quite dismissive of religion, with some stating that they 'don't have time for all that Christian bullshit' (field notes, 16 April 2014) and often mentioning the role of religion in the colonisation process as a key reason for this attitude. Religion and non-religion are central frames, then, for many Aboriginal activists.

Some activists were carefully considered in their non-religion. Andrea, an Aboriginal woman in her 30s, was open about her non-religious beliefs. Once, when religion came up in conversation, we were discussing activists' clothing. Andrea shared an anecdote about Townsville's annual Christmas-time event, Stable on the Strand (field notes, 24 June 2011). A collaboration between Townsville's Christian churches, Stable on the Strand turns a public park into a replica of the village of Bethlehem for several days. Andrea was with some family members who decided to walk through the 'village'. She told me she was receiving strange

looks from a number of people. She looked down and saw that she was wearing a Che Guevara tee shirt. As she told me the story, she laughed and pointed out the irony of wearing a shirt featuring a communist icon while visiting this event which was run by organised religion.

Our discussion of the Stable on the Strand event continued and I revealed that I had attended once, very briefly, but would love to visit it again as an ethnographic exercise. Andrea and I had previously discussed our shared non-religion, and we both found the event curious. But Stable on the Strand is a big part of Townsville's public events calendar – for five days the park along the sea is overrun with 'Roman soldiers', begging peasant children, camels and goats, and a manger holding a 'baby Jesus', surrounded by 'Mary', 'Joseph', and the 'three wise men'. Outside the perimeter of 'Bethlehem' the action continues, with offerings of Christmas cake, a giant robot playing a video of mission work, and a stage featuring Christian music and performances. Andrea and I made plans to attend, in order that we could both understand more clearly the importance of the event to the community – but we both agreed not to wear any pictures of communists on our shirts.

When Christmas-time arrived, we visited the event accompanied by Andrea's nephew, Blake, who was in his early 20s (field notes, 22 December 2011). We wandered through the village, giggling at the young men dressed in plastic armour, discussing how unlikely it was that the baby Jesus had been as white as the infant in Townsville's manger, and being horrified at the caricature-like puppets that represented the three wise men – including two puppets portraying Arabs and one with black 'skin'. We then sat to watch the stage show, which retold a number of Bible stories through interpretive dance. Though we were respectful of the beliefs of those around us, we were all bewildered at the extent of the faith we saw. We made some jokes, but mostly tried hard to understand what was going on around us – and particularly what it meant to the people participating. Despite his visible

discomfort with the religious message, Blake was surrounded by people he knew, regularly stopping to say hello and catch up with other visitors and volunteers at the event. He said that, since he attended a Catholic high school, he knew a lot of people from a range of churches around Townsville (field notes, 22 December 2011).

This trip to Stable on the Strand was, for all three of us, a performance of our non-religion. To an observer, we may have looked similar to those around us who were there for religious reasons. We paid our respects at the manger and we intently watched the stage performance; we pressed the buttons on the 'Christian' robot and patted the donkey. But our attendance and our discussions throughout the event were a display, to ourselves and to each other, of our shared non-religion. Even during this public but personal performance of our non-religion, though, I saw the importance of religion to the Townsville community broadly, and to the Aboriginal community more specifically (which I discuss further below).

In another conversation, Andrea and I delved a bit deeper in our discussion of religion and non-religion. Her mother belongs to a Millerite Adventist church, so Andrea grew up without an emphasis on celebrating birthdays or Christmas. She made it clear that she does not share the same beliefs as her mother, and in fact she does not really believe in God. However, she recognises that she is unable to know for sure whether God exists, so she classifies herself as agnostic, rather than atheist. She explained the influence of religion in her life, and her rejection of it:

> I wouldn't necessarily regard myself as an individual, on an individual level as extremely spiritual. And I'm even saying that in a … Aboriginal spirituality sense as well. I recognise other people have that, but I don't, my brain is a little bit too logical. […] I mean, I struggle with it all the time, it's something I think about a fair bit. That, right now, and I'll probably think about this until I'm gone, but right now I think there's fundamental human values that are good and bad and they're universal.

> And you find that in any culture across the board. So I kind of subscribe to that idea, that it's about our human values as opposed to a Christian value. (Interview, 11 November 2008)

For Andrea, then, non-religion is a deliberate choice. She was not raised without a religion, rather, she has made a conscious choice to be non-religious. And she has thought about the topic carefully enough to classify herself as agnostic.

Andrea and Blake are similar to the other non-religious Aboriginal activists with whom I worked, in that they are openly non-religious. But they also find meaning outside themselves, along the lines of what might be called 'spirituality'. They find solace in being 'on country' and go there when they feel emotionally drained. They do not identify as practitioners of traditional religions, however. They do not participate in religious ceremonies or rituals as such, even though they find meaning in 'place'. The census results for the Townsville region reveal a decline in the number of people who have selected the category 'Aboriginal Traditional Religions' – from 40 in the 2006 Census to 30 in 2011 (ABS 2013). Still, I argue that these people, the practitioners of traditional religions, are distinct from believers in 'New Age' spirituality who consume indigenous culture (Possamai 2002). Rather than 'discovering' these practices and making meaning from them, many contemporary Aboriginal people are drawing on their personal histories. Moreover, they are not consuming a commodity that has been packaged for them, and not 'select[ing] from history whatever suits them for their ethos' (Possamai 2002: 203). Though they do not embrace all aspects of Aboriginal religion, they are not religious individualists. They still find meaning in the collective experiences of their families and community. Andrea, for example, discusses the importance of living in a place like Townsville, where family and community are central: 'I feel a bit more at home here, even though there is that redneck element because I suppose I'm surrounded by family and friends for that support' (interview, 20 November 2008).

Rather than being felt as a religious experience, for Andrea, Blake and other Aboriginal people the importance of country is about *place* and their relationships to place. As Henry (2012: 14) puts it, 'in the process of their practices and performances, people bestow agency on places, so much so that they come to identify those places as inherently powerful and materially determinative of collective identity'. Drawing on Heidegger (1973), Henry (2012) continues that the way that places are maintained as meaningful is through 'dwelling' – that is, through social engagement such as caring for place. Places have agency because they have history, or as Henry (2012: 30) says, they are 'pregnant with practices of power and domination'. Even Aboriginal people who do not 'dwell' permanently on country can maintain connections to their place, and the relationship to place can also be maintained through memories and social relationships. Thus, connections to country are important for maintaining a sense of oneself as part of a collective group and this is probably why country has spiritual significance even for non-religious Aboriginal people.

The complex experience of being non-religious, but finding meaning through relationships to place and Ancestors, explains Andrea's reluctance to believe that atheism is taking hold amongst Aboriginal people. When I told her about my writing this chapter, and discussed the ABS finding that non-religion was spreading faster amongst Aboriginal people than amongst other demographic groups, she questioned whether that indicated an increase in atheism. Her alternative suggestions were that Aboriginal people may select that option out of convenience or because none of the other options offered in the Census really describe their beliefs. She essentially agrees with the argument that non-religion is incompatible with Aboriginality. Although few people might practise Aboriginal traditional religions to their fullest extent, she expects that many people observe aspects of these traditions, in the same way that she does (field notes, 22 January 2014). According to this interpretation, people might have 'no religion' but may still be 'spiritual'.

The Importance of Religion for the Non-religious

The role religion has played in colonial history, and activists' analysis of power relations, have led many activists to be openly non-religious. However, as an institution, religion still plays a central role in the political, family and social lives of Aboriginal people, whether or not they personally identify as being religious. Non-religious people must participate in religion to some extent in order to avoid isolating themselves from their families and communities. And the use of religion is not only social but also strategic, used to frame activist activities in certain ways. In the following section I discuss those aspects of Aboriginal life in which religion is important.

Politics

As discussed above, non-religious activists are reluctant to identify with religious organisations even when those organisations are committed to social justice. For many Aboriginal political activists, awareness of the Church's long-term role in the domination of Aboriginal people outweighs their appreciation of the positive acts of a few religious individuals or groups in the struggle for civil rights. Activists differentiate between individuals (who may be good or bad) and institutions, and these institutions have been proven, according to their analyses, to have had long-term negative influences on Aboriginal lives. However, religion as a structure is important to Aboriginal activism. Activists use religion to construct an image of their protests as being non-violent. They use religion to appeal to a wider constituency of potential supporters. The appeal to, and use of, religion in activism can be divisive if it involves issues of faith and belief rather than simply support for the movement. But some activists are able to 'get away' with even overt displays of religious

belief because they have proven themselves in other, more political, ways, as the following section will illustrate.

In May 2014, I was part of a small group arranging a public screening of the John Pilger documentary, *Utopia*, which is about Indigenous disadvantage in Australia broadly, and specifically about the inaction of governments and their failure to address problems like poor health, overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prisons, and overcrowded houses in Aboriginal communities. The event was held at James Cook University, in Townsville, and was well attended by students and university staff, as well as community members not affiliated with the university. Along with the film, we organised a panel discussion, and in the planning for that event saw some of the tensions between religion and politics play out.

Our first panel member, Joanne, is a prominent local activist. Joanne was keen to be involved, but cautious about who else would be on the panel with her. Joanne made it clear that we should not ask Francine, another local activist. According to Joanne, Francine (who openly identifies as a born-again Christian) would just talk about Jesus and would not be 'political enough' (field notes, 24 April 2014). I have seen Francine speak at many events, from community meetings to academic presentations to protest demonstrations to meetings with government officials. Unless she is specifically asked to open or close the event with a prayer, she does not bring up her religious beliefs. In private conversation she does, however, and speaks about the importance of religion to her personal healing journey (as discussed above). According to Francine, her church helped her overcome personal trauma from her earlier life as well as intergenerational trauma as a result of government (and church) treatment of Aboriginal people (interview, 28 March 2008).

Instead of Francine, at Joanne's suggestion, we asked Jeff, a man from a nearby town, who had served almost two years in prison for what many consider a political protest. On the night of the panel discussion, Jeff spoke at length about how he turned to religion while in

prison, in order to turn his life around. He talked about praying and about religious visions (field notes, 14 May 2014). Compared to Francine, whom I have seen speak at numerous events, Jeff's contributions were far more overtly religious. So why are his beliefs more acceptable? There are undoubtedly personal dynamics influencing Joanne's preference for Jeff over Francine. But there is also an implication that Jeff can 'get away' with an overt display of religiosity because it contributes to the political nature of his story. Based on my fieldwork with activists, my suggestion is that while many political activists view overt discussion of religion as a 'sin' of sorts, Jeff's 'sins' are forgiven because they are woven into a story of imprisonment and resistance.

In my first month of fieldwork I joined an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activist group which was planning protests outside the trial of Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley, a police officer charged with manslaughter following the 2004 death in custody of Aboriginal man Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island (see Glowczewski 2008; Hooper 2009; Waters 2008). A week before the trial, an Aboriginal clergyman, Pastor James, attended the planning meeting and said that in this trial 'the law in Australia is on trial. If there is a God for the Aboriginal people, this is Him' (field notes, 5 June 2007). Christianity here is linked specifically to political outcomes. The focus of the meetings throughout that month was on ensuring that the protests were non-violent, well-attended and well-organised. Activists were especially keen to involve local churches. They asked a white woman in the group, herself an Anglican chaplain, to contact the leaders of every church in Townsville to invite them to attend the daily protest demonstrations (field notes, 15 May 2007). The trial lasted for over a week and each morning our demonstration began with a prayer vigil – a group of activists standing in a circle, often holding hands, while traditionally-dressed men cleansed the area with smoke and Aboriginal women prayed aloud for justice (field notes, 12–19 June 2007).

Inviting the clergy and opening the demonstrations with prayers had two key purposes. The first was to appeal to a broader audience. Activists tried to frame the protests as a human rights issue, rather than a 'black issue' (see Petray 2010). To contribute to that framing, activists wanted a crowd of non-Indigenous supporters to attend their protest, to signal via the media that it really was not a black issue. Religious leaders were seen as key players in that framing. First, they had the potential to entice other members of their congregations and further swell the crowd. Second, individual clergy may be seen as symbols – their presence at a protest stands for 'the Church'. And if 'the Church' is supportive of an issue, then it really is bigger and broader than a 'black issue'.

The other purpose of the presence of the clergy and the opening prayers was to frame the protests as decidedly non-violent. As activist Joanne said in one of the meetings to plan the events: 'We'll be having prayers beforehand, to set the tone for the day as calm and peaceful. We'll get our clergy up there to calm our mob before the trial starts' (field notes, 5 June 2007). Tilly (2003) argues that protests, and social movements more broadly, must have, in order to be successful, a strong combination of four elements: worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. In our protests, worthiness was demonstrated by maintaining a publicly acceptable image, for example by having clergy supporting the movement, by opening with prayers and by maintaining a peaceful image. The presence of religious leaders was expected to calm any anger that might otherwise be expressed by the crowd. And, again, the symbolism of 'the Church' sent a message to the broader public that this was a non-violent group of people. This was a concerted effort to increase the seeming 'worthiness' of the Aboriginal movement, which was important, given their small numbers at these protests (Tilly 2003).

In addition to Christian prayers, the protest demonstrations were begun with a smoking ceremony and often a call out to 'the Ancestors' as part of the opening prayers. One

morning of the protest, we looked up and saw two Brahminy Kites, birds of prey who were circling over our heads. Someone said that they were Ancestors who had heard the call out in language and had come to look after the protesters (field notes, 19 June 2007). These references to traditional religious beliefs, totems and the spirit world are – like the inclusion of Christian religion in protests – strategic, but still genuine. They position Aboriginal people as deeply spiritual and connected to their past, especially to their pre-colonial past. In a protest setting, this is vital because it adds legitimacy to any protest against introduced social structures like the police and the justice system. This strategic essentialism is an important political strategy for Indigenous peoples around the world (Spivak 1988). But it is especially important for Aboriginal people in the more highly settled areas of Australia, who are seen to have 'lost' their cultures (Tonkinson 1997). By referring regularly to traditional beliefs and publicly practising them, Aboriginal activists attempt to avoid this stereotype.

I do not want to suggest that activists are deviously using religion, Christian or traditional, to further their own aims. Aboriginal people are often suspected of using traditional religions for political gain – strategic essentialism that is not necessarily genuine. For example, in the wake of the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair, some Aboriginal beliefs were called into question. In 1994, in response to a proposed bridge to Hindmarsh Island in South Australia, a group of Ngarrindjeri women objected on the grounds of the site's spiritual significance. They did not reveal details, however, because the significance was considered 'secret sacred' knowledge (Tonkinson 1997). Others disputed these claims, saying that there was no spiritual significance to Hindmarsh Island, but that the women were opposed to the bridge construction for political reasons. The suggestion was that 'traditional' religious beliefs were fabricated to support a particular political position (Tonkinson 1997). Activities reidentification with traditional religions are often called 'cultural revival', and some people take them as proof of 'inauthenticity and proof of "loss of culture"' (Tonkinson 1997: 8).

Tonkinson (1997: 7) problematises this easy dismissal of the women's business that was used to halt the construction of the Hindmarsh Island bridge, suggesting a complex situation involving tension 'between Aboriginal conceptions of reality and Western legal precepts'. Moreover, he paints the meaning of 'cultural revival' as a way of socialising younger generations of Aboriginal people into a strongly Aboriginal cultural identity. That is, reviving culture is not about political gain, but about strong communities.

Community and Family

Religion is not only important to activists for its political implications, however. It is also a central aspect of life around which the Aboriginal community is organised. Religious institutions act as social hubs for the Aboriginal community in Townsville. Christian churches are especially important, both as a physical place for the community to come together and through events like Sorry Business[3]. Religious ceremonies are an important setting for the renewal and strengthening of social relationships, even for people who identify as atheists or agnostics. And religion is central to many families, thus preventing many individuals who may be outspokenly non-religious from fully disconnecting themselves from religion.

By way of example, I return to the public screening of the documentary, *Utopia*. The event was opened with a prayer which displayed another interesting tension between religion and politics. The prayer was partly in Birrigubba, a local Aboriginal language, and partly in English. The English portion of the prayer was delivered both to 'the Ancestors' and to 'Father God' (field notes, 14 May 2014). This prayer was included at the suggestion of

[3] 'Sorry Business' is the term used by many Aboriginal people to refer to the complex of activities and rituals that surround deaths, from the death itself through the funeral and sometimes to the delayed unveiling of tombstones.

Joanne and another activist who advised us in the lead-up to this event. It was needed, they said, because the film would re-open old wounds for many Aboriginal community members in the audience. 'These people have lived through the stuff in this film', we were told, 'and we need to start with a prayer to keep it calm' (field notes, 7 May 2014). Although both of these activists who suggested the prayer are non-religious, and are in fact quite dismissive of religious beliefs, they recognised the importance of religion to their community.

One of the things that older community members have 'lived through' is the imposition of Christianity on Aboriginal people through the missions, as discussed above. It would be reasonable for an activist to deliberately exclude religion from a setting such as the documentary screening. The Christian church has a bad track record for Aboriginal people, so activists might understandably avoid having it present at community events. However, religion *is* important to many within the community, and this importance is more compelling than the political arguments against 'the Church'. Belief is given more consideration than non-belief; that is, potentially alienating a non-religious person by opening with a prayer is not considered to be as risky as offending a religious person by omitting the prayers.

St Theresa's Church, as a place, is representative of strong ties between community members. I suggest that the place has taken on significance in the same way that home places (being 'on country') do, as discussed above. The historical importance of St Theresa's has embedded it as a meaningful place even for non-religious community members. It has housed community meetings and consultations and is also a popular venue for the funerals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Most funerals that I attended or heard about were held at St Theresa's Church, but when the deceased was a religious person, the funeral was held at his or her own church. Again, because of relationships with family members – living as well as deceased – non-religious Aboriginal people must maintain a connection to the church. Attending events and meetings there signifies a person's links to the Aboriginal

community. At the same time, the place serves to build and rebuild these ties. Community meetings and other periodic events like funerals have a functional role. St Theresa's – and, by extension, religion – is a social phenomenon much like those described by Stanner and Durkheim (in Morphy 1988: 242): 'the function of religion was social in that religion reinforced social groups'. Babidge (2006) argues that funerals are sites where relationships are practised and performed. This designation applies not only to funerals, but to religion more broadly. The church is a place where, regardless of their religious beliefs, Aboriginal people perform their connections to the community and to their families.

Conclusions: Religion and the Non-religious

Aboriginal non-religion amongst activists in Townsville is not dogmatic or fervent. Atheists, agnostics and theists work together for a common cause and religion is bound up with that cause despite the personal beliefs of some non-religious activists. There is obviously some strategic intent on the part of activists, but the inclusion of religion as central to their activities is more about respecting and including religious family and community members. The strategic implications are latent. For non-religious Aboriginal people, too, there is still importance placed on ancestral spirits, totems and country. Meaning is made through these spiritual relationships.

For Aboriginal people, then, the distinction between sacred and secular is blurry. Even those who profess not to adhere to religion still cannot extricate themselves from it, but this is unproblematic for them. Chavura (2011) discusses the distinction between sacred and secular realms with regards to the state. Though the two are often presented as opposite ends of a spectrum, in which 'things pertaining to the secular are not things pertaining to the sacred' (Chavura 2011: 69), they have, in fact, historically overlapped. Secular has not always meant 'anti-religious', and it is this meaning of secular that best describes the kind of

non-religion of Aboriginal people. They make space for the beliefs of Christians and other religious observers, and they have space for their own observation of some traditional beliefs, without identifying themselves as religious.

Lohrey (2006: 42) says that '[s]ecular doesn't mean without; it doesn't mean empty'. This is an apt description of Aboriginal non-religion. Aboriginal people are bound up in a net of relationships and these relationships make it impossible to be 'without'. Their connection to country and Ancestors gives them a sense of spirituality, even without officially observing a particular religion. Their connection to religious family members keeps them from too-openly renouncing religious observance, even when they see it as 'bullshit'. Their membership in a tight-knit (but not conflict-free) community brings them to churches for events and meetings. Aboriginal social ties bind them to religion, even when they are non-religious, and religion binds them to one another.

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