

The Interfaith Landscape Down Under

Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Australia

By Rev Dr Michael Trainor

Travelling in a fried-out Kombi
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 lyrics from a 1981 song by Australian band 'Men at Work' try 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 and reflected in our art and music, and the sense of ease, hospitality and inclusivity that have (not always) defined the national temper.

As an introduction to the work of the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, I want to sum up and briefly explore the demographic and socio-political dimensions of Australia from the last sentence.¹ First I 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 the unique contribution which Australians can make to the global scene and inter-religious matters, especially Jewish-Christian relations.

Europeans set out in the 17th century to verify the existence of 'Terra Australis', the hypothetical and mythical 'great South Land' ('Australis del Spiritu Santo') that was shrouded in mystery on maps of the 15th century and later. Portuguese navigator Pedro Fernandez de Quiros (1565-1614), with the blessing of Pope Clement VIII (of Clementine Hall fame in the Vatican) and Spain's Philip III, set out in 1605 to find that lost 'Great South Land'. His voyage of discovery was eventually disastrous, but that's another story. Traders from the Indonesian islands had long visited northern Australia, and Asians from further north had probably sighted if not landed on Australian soil before Willem Janszoon. The Dutchman landed in the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia on 26 February 1606, called the place 'New Zealand', and judged 'there was no good to be done there'² Ten years later, another Dutchman, Dirk Hartog, set foot on the west coast of Australia, without knowing 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).

¹ While the perspective I take is an Australian one, I also acknowledge that the ACCJ also includes inter-religious representation from New Zealand, which requires a separate contribution.

² Mark Peel, *A Little History of Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2006), 12.

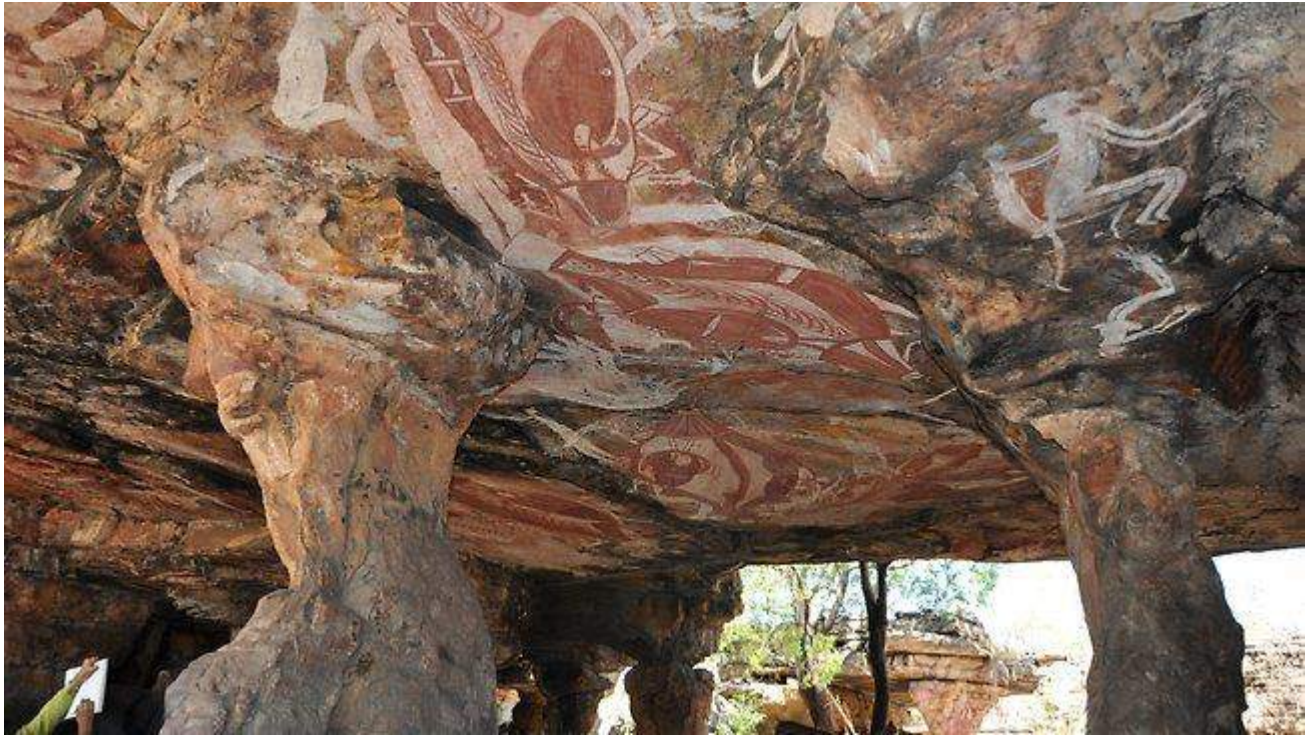


Figure 1. 28000 year old Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter³

The most significant historical moment from the European perspective was the claiming of the east Australian coast by British naval captain 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, Captain Arthur Philip led the first fleet into Botany Bay, near Sydney, bearing 1336 people. Over half (543 males, 189 females, and 22 convict children) were convicts who were transported to the colony for a wide variety of crimes for a period of seven or 14 years, or for ‘the term of their natural life’.⁴ Most were Catholics, though there were eight Jews among them. Sydney town was established as a convict colony, though it became a place where the English could prosper. But Australia was not England, the climate was very different in a world that seemed upside-down and one early European visitor remarked it would not even support ‘the miserablest People in the world’.⁵

It soon became clear to Philip and his soldiers and convicts that 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 suggest even 100 000 years. In other words, Australia is 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 of the Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter in south-western Arnhem land in the Northern Territory (Fig. 1) and the 6000BCE Kakadu rock painting of the ‘lightning God’ (Fig. 2) attest to this.

³ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/finding-puts-aborigines-among-arts-avant-garde/story-fn9d3avm-1226398075663>.

⁴ Mollie Gillen, *The Search for John Small, First Fleeter* (Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1986); John Copley, *The crimes of the First Fleet convicts* ([2nd] ed.), (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1989).

⁵ Peel, *Little*, 12.

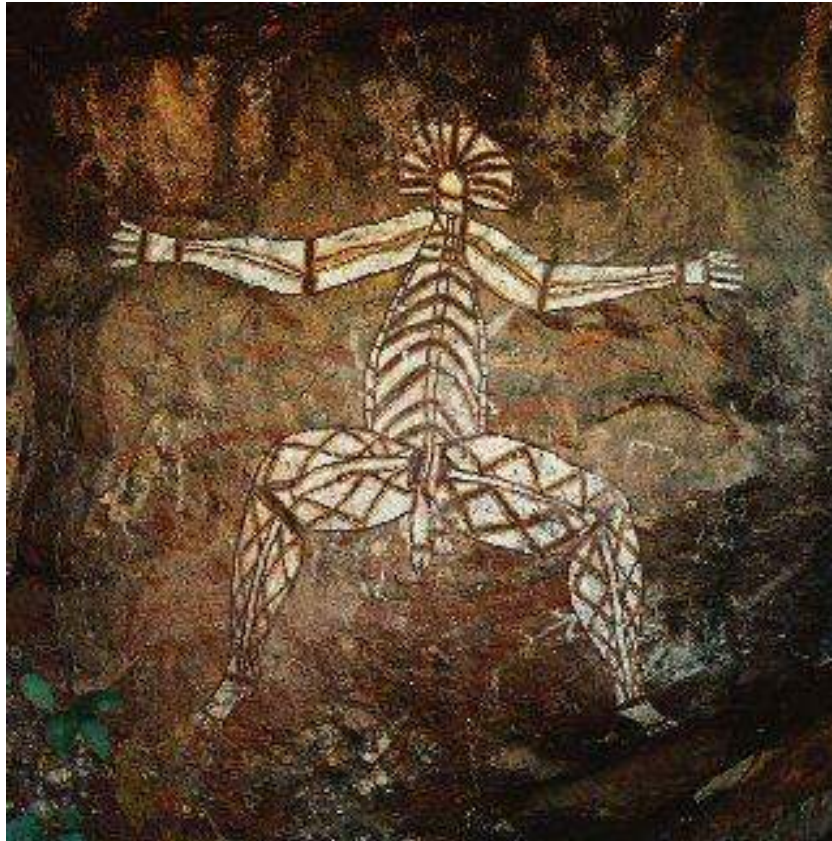


Figure 2. *Lightning God, Kakadu c. 6,000 BCE*⁶

The relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has not always been harmonious.

Clarke summarises Australian history since Europeanisation:

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.⁷

This struggle for reconciliation is one of the unresolved dark undercurrents of our history. While space prevents a thorough explication of the reason for this, there is another side to our story that, in a way, expresses what has happened since European settlement. The convict narrative of early settlement ended in the mid-19th century, leaving a unique legacy, as ‘free’ settlements (like Adelaide in South Australia) were established around Australia. People mostly from the British Isles migrated to Australia: some grabbed large tracts of land, some were farm labourers and housemaids. The dominant religious grouping was Christian, though tensions were common between the strategists and colonial powerbrokers, who were mainly Anglicans or Protestants, and the Roman Catholics, who were over-represented in the convict gangs. These tensions have generally ameliorated since the 1960s.

⁶ <http://www.ancient-wisdom.com/aborigines.htm>

⁷ Frank G. Clarke, *The History of Australia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), xi.

Ways of reconciliation between whites and the First Australians have continued following the formal recognition of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as citizens in a national vote in the 1967. The landmark 'Mabo' High Court ruling in 1992 recognised indigenous Australians as the rightful owners and inheritors of a land no longer deemed 'Terra Nullius'. Moves continue to include them explicitly in the Australian Constitution. More pertinent is the growing desire to appreciate their culture and religion.

The fact that Australia was established as a convict jail by Great Britain defined the future characteristics of Australia: its secularity and the terminus of mobility. Secularism gave it a distinctly profane 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'.⁸

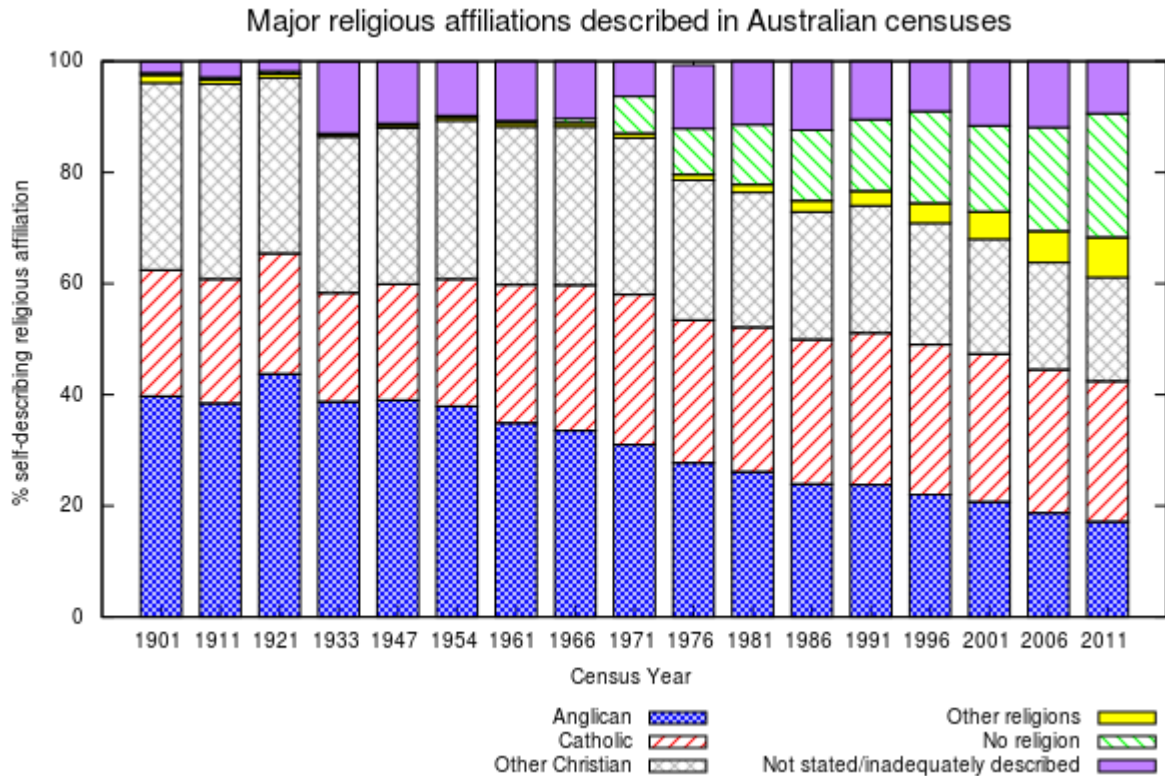
Against the background of this potted history of early European Australian history sits the realisation that, leaving aside the First Australians, every other person who lives in Australia is either a first generation migrant or the generational offspring of migrants or early settlers. According to the 2011 census, almost half of the present population was born overseas or had at least one overseas-born parent.⁹ In my own case, my great-grandfather was an Irish Catholic while my great-great-grandfather was an English Jew who helped establish the first synagogue in Adelaide. Great waves of migration (the original settlement, after the two World Wars, the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East) are responsible for Australia becoming arguably the most multicultural and multi-faith country on this planet.¹⁰ Its secularity and growing cultural diversity have enabled it to be a place of welcome, strangeness and freedom in which formal religion, as represented by the mainstream Christian denominations, does not determine the political agenda and co-exists with a multiplicity of religious groups and spiritual expressions. This is evident in the 2011 census.¹¹

⁸ 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).

⁹ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2071.0Main%20Features902012%E2%80%93932013>

¹⁰ Cusack, 'Religion,' 42.

¹¹ Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37138532>



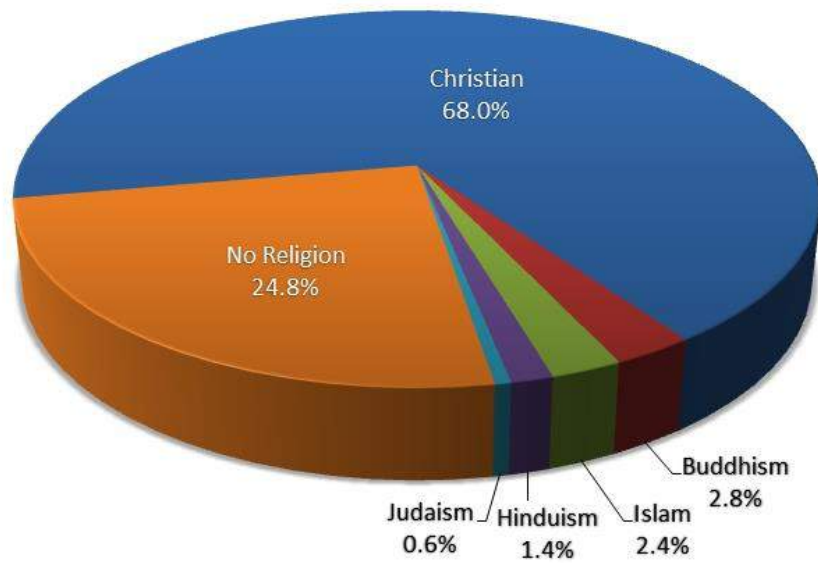
European settlement in Australia occurred for reasons other than religious and its governance occurs without religious institutions or symbols shaping or determining its characteristics. This is what is meant by ‘secularisation’.¹² Social commentators have identified secularisation and multiculturalism as the two main cultural shapers since the late twentieth century.¹³

While religious fundamentalism and extremism do exist, a growing number of Australians declared themselves as having ‘no religion’ in the most recent Census and 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.¹⁴ According to the 2011 census, 68% of Australians identified themselves as Christians, 2.8% as Buddhist, 2.4% as Muslims, and 0.6% (97,335) as Jewish (although the Jewish figure is probably closer to 120,000, 90% of whom live in Melbourne and Sydney).

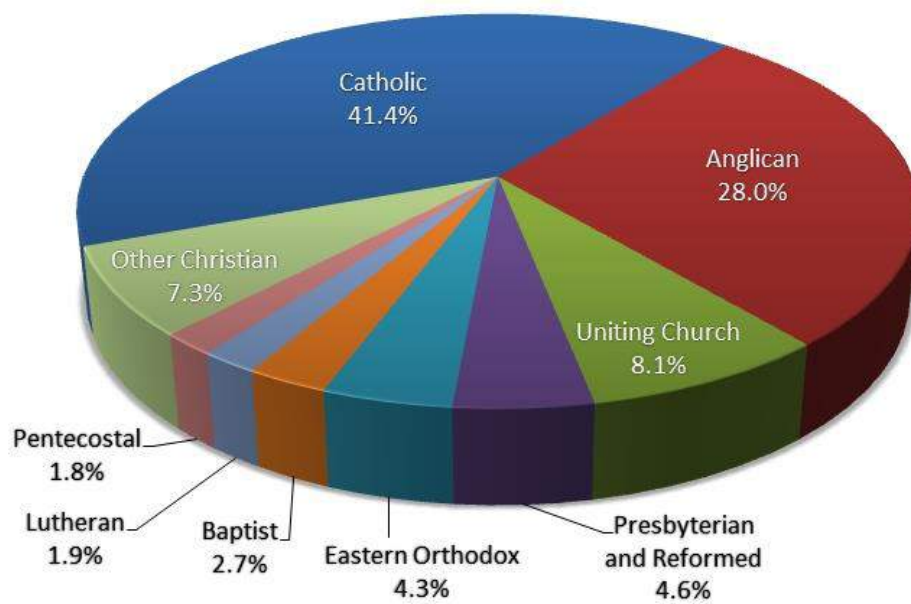
¹² Cusack, ‘Religion,’ 32; Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 107.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ See, for example, Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning, With or Without Religion* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2016).



*Religion & No Religion (2011 Census)*¹⁵



*Major Religious Groupings in Australia (2011 Census)*¹⁶

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

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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.¹⁷

It is within this context that Jewish-Christian relations grew and have flourished. This is evident in the growing maturity of the Australian Council of Christians and Jews. While I come into this conversation from the perspective of a Catholic-Christian theologian teaching within a tertiary institution, the Australian-Jewish narrative deserves separate presentation. However, in attempting to summarise the national historical and cultural context that would assist amity and cooperation, and is reflected in my experience within inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation as evident in the ACCJ, 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'. Sinclair draws a similar conclusion about the Australian imaginary, which is described as 'characterised by a distaste for display—whether aesthetic or affective'.¹⁸

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;

¹⁷ Mark Peel and Christina Twomey, *A History of Australia*. (Palgrave Essential Histories. Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xiv.

¹⁸ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32. Bouma's reference to 'a shy hope in the heart' comes from John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation* (Newtown, NSW: Millenium, 1992), 172. Bouma's reference to Sinclair is to Jennifer Sinclair, 'Spirituality and the (secular) ordinary Australian imaginary', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18 (2004): 274.

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.

This is my idiosyncratic interpretation of our historical context, drawing upon Australian social researchers. Hopefully, it provides some context for the importance of the vision for the ACCJ within this multicultural and religiously diverse landscape. There are others who would offer other and perhaps different 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 I offer 10 insights which a consideration of the Australian perspective can bring to inter-religious conversation and could become the focus for future reflections amongst those of us who are involved in the vital work of the ACCJ. These will change in time and other themes will appear. However each of the ones I present below deserve 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
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.