

Reframing Jesus: Listening for the Contextualised Christ Figure in Aboriginal Communities

by

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and
2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Labhaoise Upton 07/09/2021

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Aboriginal readers are advised that the following section contains the names of some people who have passed on.

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Summary

This project explores the inculturation of Jesus Christ among Aboriginal nations along the dingo songline, with a focus on the Spirit, and incarnation of, Jesus Christ existent in Australian nations before invasion. Approached through a Catholic lens, the project engages with the 1986 Papal Address to Aboriginal Catholics to open a door for non-Aboriginal people to learn from Aboriginal visions of Christ.

The research was carried out as a listening project, employing the methodology of reflexive ethnography and sacred space concepts. It sought to privilege Aboriginal voices, and to remain accountable to their wisdom by actively engaging with an Aboriginal Reference group throughout.

Through sample interviews across a range of settings, I enquired into the nature of how the Christ-figure sits within Aboriginal cosmologies. This listening illuminated diverse visions of Christ, who largely connected to Country and people in roles familiar across Western Christianity. Drawing from the Western theologians Karl Rahner, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards to articulate my cultural frame, I recognise elements of the Wisdom tradition and the cosmic Christ in the Aboriginal knowledge shared with me. This frame is used to present ways to move forward in creating a more culturally-inclusive Church that recognises the spiritual authority and autonomy of Aboriginal peoples.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

To all the people I would say: Come, listen to us, we will tell you our culture. Learn from us. That way we will all survive. We share this country. We need to work together and learn from each other.¹

Kathleen Kemarre Wallace

Eastern Arrernte Catholic woman

Learn from us, as we have had to learn from you.

Mandawuy Yunupingu²

Gumatj educator and musician

This research project is an enquiry into Aboriginal perception and articulation of the existence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in pre-invasion cosmologies. It asks the question: Is the figure of Jesus Christ recognised by Australian Aboriginal Christians as a pre-invasion presence, and how is this figure inculturated by these Christians?

The project evolved as a response to invitation from numerous Aboriginal Christians who argue that only when non-Aboriginal Christians familiarise themselves with Aboriginal spiritualities will we be able to move forward in an inclusive church informed by the Spirit as it has been mediated in this particular place for millennia.

¹ Kathleen Kemarre Wallace, *Listen deeply, let these stories in* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2009), blurb.

² Mandawuy Yunupingu, "Foreword" in *Elders: Wisdom From Australia's Indigenous Leaders*, ed. Peter McConchie (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2003), vi.

Prominent theologian Anne Pattel-Gray is a Bidjara/Kari Kari woman, who was the first Aboriginal person to graduate with a PhD from the University of Sydney. Widely published, and a well-known leader in justice and reconciliation, she writes of the heretical Christology brought to this continent by white people.³

The European so-called 'Christians' did not bring the Christ, the Anointed One; they did not share a liberating Christ with the Aboriginal People of Australia...they brought a Christ that dispossessed, enslaved and killed; a Christ full of hatred and fear; a Christ of racism.⁴

Palawa theologian and Harvard post-doctoral fellow Lee Miena Skye describes Australian Aboriginal people as forced to adopt a Christology of violence.⁵ She writes:

...the missionaries possessed a subordinating Christology that must save those they saw as inferior, the 'savage', both culturally and spiritually. The dehumanising of the Australian Aboriginal created a consciousness that treated them as less than animals bringing about genocide... Aboriginals were the victims of a Christology that imprisoned and eventually helped to destroy them rather than save them. ⁶

This research will seek to learn about Christ as viewed by Aboriginal communities (insomuch as that is possible for a European); a Christ that can help us to shed these dehumanising and evil practices and move forward with shared vision.

This thesis also evolved as a personal response, as a practising Catholic, to the gap in recognition of Aboriginal spirituality I perceive in many parishes on Aboriginal lands.

³ Anne Pattel-Grey, *The great white flood: racism in Australia* (Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998), 120-131.

⁴ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 123.

⁵ Lee Miena Skye, *Kerygmatics of the new millennium: a study of Australian Aboriginal women's Christology*, (South Australia: University of South Australia, 1998), 7.

⁶ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 4-7.

Growing up I was taught by Aboriginal people, and my own family taught me, that I lived on stolen land. Both groups shaped my spirituality and my perspectives on social justice issues around land rights and unjust government policy.

As an adult working in Aboriginal education, I cannot see connections between the communities I work in and the community in which I worship. I know there are Aboriginal Catholic communities, but see no evidence of Aboriginality in most churches, despite them being on Kurna land. I cannot reconcile this with my Catholicism and Vatican II in particular.

After reading, and talking with Aboriginal friends, many questions developed, crystallising eventually into my research question. Although there were many, many options this one seemed to be the one most Aboriginal people wanted to speak about and I wanted to respond to that invitation. With it came the obstacles and ethical questions I will describe in the Methodology chapter.

The guilt I live with every day has been a large factor shaping my life choices. This thesis is written partly out of curiosity and respect, but in part it is also motivated by shame as a white woman living on stolen land. To walk every day on stolen land and see the ongoing results of the brutal devastation my people have wrought on Aboriginal peoples, and the shame I feel at the kindness and hands of friendship I often meet from these peoples, is to challenge the way I live and interact. The shame might be the motivation, but the thesis has led me on a fascinating journey. While nothing compared to what Aboriginal communities feel – and I feel presumptuous daring to articulate pain in the face of that – I felt that the

only way I could bear to live with that colonial guilt and shame was to try to learn how to move forward more justly with Aboriginal peoples; to move forward in the right way, learning from and respecting Aboriginal authority as land owners and custodians of knowledge (albeit knowledge that is not always for me).

This project is very much a partnership between me and the many Aboriginal friends and colleagues, whose generosity of time, spirit, knowledge, and criticism facilitated the project and my learning.

I seek to identify Aboriginal concepts of Christ that resonate with and further non-Aboriginal concepts. I do this to seek new dialogue in the Church inclusive of a theology all Australians can recognise as articulating their input. I seek to find and articulate ways non-Aboriginal people can respectfully receive proffered knowledge and wisdom from Aboriginal communities. This is approached mindful of the terrible damage and brutality visited on Aboriginal peoples by the Church, and an ongoing failure to listen.

Uniting Church minister Reverend Chris Budden raises important standpoint issues for people like myself engaging in this type of conversation.

Budden's work is:

...concerned for what it means to be part of that people who are Second peoples, invaders and newcomers, and how faith must be approached differently if we are conscious of our place in this land.⁷

He goes on to question how Second peoples approach theology, covenant and treaty when they are the offending party and are not the ones who can forgive or decide what reconciliation should look like.⁸ He writes that this is a conversation in which we are guests, in which it is not about what we want, but what Indigenous people want.⁹ His words impacted on my project throughout, and will resonate particularly in the methodology chapter, where I committed to relinquishing control and agenda in favour of humility and an alternative cultural perspective.

Framework

The Second Vatican Council took place between 1962 and 1965. It was the surprising and visionary initiative of what was thought to be a caretaker Pope, Pope John XXIII. At the time the Council was called, the Church was still operating with an interpretation of the ecclesiastical dogma that outside the Church there is no salvation (*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) and that emphasised damnation to outside groups.¹⁰ The Council produced a vast literature of proposals and working papers, many of which challenged this doctrine and its

⁷Chris Budden, *Following Christ in invaded space: doing theology on Aboriginal land* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 1.

⁸Budden, *Following Christ in invaded space*, 157.

⁹Budden, *Following Christ in invaded space*, 161.

¹⁰ Joseph Pohle, "Religious Toleration," *New Advent* (2020), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14763a.html>.

interpretation. At the end of this Council, which included bishops, members of religious orders, theologians, and observers, sixteen final documents were agreed upon, including *Lumen Gentium*.

Of the Council, Catholic theologian Gerard Mannion wrote:

The council's true and lasting significance, however, would be with regard to the implementation of the ecclesial vision and reforms outlined in those documents and the resultant impact upon the church, its subsequent teaching and the life of Catholics worldwide...The Catholic Church's understanding of relations with other Christians, other religious traditions, as well as communities and people of no faith were likewise radically changed for the better.¹¹

Mannion also commented on the Papal agenda to 'further implement the spirit and intentions of Vatican II with regard to contemporary church-world, ecumenical and interfaith relations to become further consolidated and so better understood.'¹²

John Borelli is a Catholic academic and ex-consultant to the Vatican. He writes that the Second Vatican Council renewed the Catholic Church and redirected Catholics especially towards social justice and dialogue. He describes the current Pope, Francis, as:

...a man of social justice and dialogue, thoroughly formed in the principles and teachings of Pope John's Vatican II...Francis... is already seen as a change in direction and a correction of the immediate [conservative intervening years], more like John XXIII than the other (Popes).¹³

¹¹ Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Jason Welle, eds., *Catholicism opening to the world and other confessions: Vatican II and its Impact* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ch. 1, 3-4, https://doi-org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/10.1007/978-3-319-98581-7_1.

¹² Latinovic and Mannion, *Catholicism opening to the world and other confessions*, ch. 1, 6.

¹³ John Borelli, "In the footsteps of John XXIII: Pope Francis and the embodiment of Vatican II", *E-International Relations*, May 16, 2013, <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/16/in-the-footsteps-of-john-xxiii-pope-francis-and-the-embodiment-of-vatican-ii/>.

In Francis' papacy, we are seeing a return to the values of inclusivity espoused by Vatican

II. It is thus an appropriate time to look at current interpretations of the documents.

The Council discussed the universality of Christ bringing together, while simultaneously transcending, diverse cultures. *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and one of the principal conciliar documents, reads:

By communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body...

It follows that though there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than an earthly nature...since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world the Church or people of God in establishing that kingdom takes nothing away from the temporary welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. ...This characteristic of universality which adorns the people of God is a gift from the Lord Himself.

All men are called to belong to the new people of God. Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God's will may be fulfilled. In the beginning God made human nature one and decreed that all His children, scattered as they were, would finally be gathered together as one. It was for this purpose that God sent His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God. For this too God sent the Spirit of His Son as Lord and Life-giver.¹⁴¹⁵

This universality of Spirit and recognition of diversity permeated the speech famously given by successive Pope John Paul II in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, in 1986. This speech, encapsulating and contextualising the essence of *Lumen Gentium*, will form the broad basis

¹⁴ "*Lumen Gentium*," Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican, last modified November 21, 1964, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. .

¹⁵ The age of the document reflects contemporary exclusive language. Clearly, humankind is to be read for 'men', and 'brothers', should be more correctly read as 'brothers and sisters'. Similarly, language for God should indicate a recognition of God and the Holy Spirit as non-gender-specific.

for my examination of Aboriginal views of Jesus. The speech was a deliberate argument for recognising and nurturing Christianity within the context of Aboriginality, and maintaining the God-given culture that glorifies Christ through its distinct features. The Pope was clear in his assertion that Jesus is an introduced concept and unwavering in his vision of Aboriginal cultures as imbued with the sacred.

In his opening paragraph, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed God-given gifts expressed across cultures, a theme he reinforced repeatedly throughout the speech:

...to all human beings throughout the ages God has given a desire for himself, a desire which different cultures have tried to express in their own ways.¹⁶

The holiness of Aboriginal cultures is affirmed, and the presence of God in fundamental Aboriginality, before tying these cultures back in with Jesus Christ and the Good News of the Gospel:

But for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your Dreaming (*sic*), which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain for ever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in Creation. You must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives.

Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost. Do you perhaps remember those words that Paul VI spoke to the Aboriginal people during his visit to them in 1970? On that occasion he said: 'We

¹⁶ "Pilgrimage in Australia", Address of John Paul II to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Blatherskite Park, Alice Springs, Vatican, 1986, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html.

know that you have a life style proper to your own ethnic genius or culture – a culture which the Church respects and which she does not in any way ask you to renounce... Society itself is enriched by the presence of different cultural and ethnic elements. For us you and the values you represent are precious. We deeply respect your dignity and reiterate our deep affection for you’.

For thousands of years this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man’s relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.

The silence of the bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God’s Spirit.

These achievements are indications of human strivings. And in these strivings you showed a dignity open to the message of God’s revealed wisdom to all men and women, which is the great truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Pope John Paul II then revealed his position on Jesus. While he saw God in Aboriginal life and history, he saw Jesus as distinct from Aboriginal cultures, although he saw Christian elements among them:

Some of the stories from your Dreamtime (*sic*) legends (*sic*) speak powerfully of the great mysteries of human life, its frailty, its need for help, its closeness to spiritual powers and the value of the human person. They are not unlike some of the great inspired lessons from the people among whom Jesus himself was born. It is wonderful to see how people, as they accept the Gospel of Jesus, find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people.

You have learned how to survive, whether on your own lands, or scattered among the towns and cities. Though your difficulties are not yet over, you must learn to draw on the endurance which your ancient ceremonies have taught you. Endurance brings with it patience; patience helps you to find the way ahead, and gives you courage for your journey.¹⁸

¹⁷ Vatican, “Pilgrimage in Australia.”

¹⁸ Vatican, “Pilgrimage in Australia.”

I will argue that according to the data generated by this project, Jesus is reflected in all cultures, a statement drawn from *Lumen Gentium*; a slightly different interpretation but one which has profound implications for the interviewees in this project. This reflection is not necessarily after contact with the Gospel. I will also challenge, through the experiences and traditions of Aboriginal interviewees, that Jesus was unknown on this continent before invasion. In fact their wisdom will support Pope John Paul II's assertion that Aboriginal people were always in touch with the Holy Spirit and must bring their culture to Christianity, drawing new life and strength from the Gospel 'in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts':

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks all languages. It esteems and embraces all cultures. It supports them in everything human and, when necessary, it purifies them. Always and everywhere the Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God.

That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians. It meets your deepest desires. You do not have to be people divided into two parts, as though an Aboriginal had to borrow the faith and life of Christianity, like a hat or a pair of shoes, from someone else who owns them. Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your own culture. To develop in this way will make you more than ever truly Aboriginal.

The old ways can draw new life and strength from the Gospel. The message of Jesus Christ can lift up your lives to new heights, reinforce all your positive values and add many others, which only the Gospel in its originality proposes. Take this Gospel into your own language and way of speaking; let its spirit penetrate your communities and determine your behaviour towards each other, let it bring new strength to your stories and your ceremonies. Let the Gospel come into your hearts and renew your personal lives. The Church invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts. All over the world people worship God and read his word in their own language, and colour the great signs and symbols of religion with touches of their own traditions. Why should you be different from them in this regard, why should you not be allowed the happiness of being with God and each other in Aboriginal fashion?¹⁹

Dear Aboriginal people: the hour has come for you to take on new courage and new hope. You are called to remember the past, to be faithful to your worthy traditions,

¹⁹Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

and to adapt your living culture whenever this is required by your own needs and those of your fellowman. Above all you are called to open your hearts ever more to the consoling, purifying and uplifting message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died so that we might all have life, and have it to the full.²⁰

This document, to which I must respond as an Australian and a Catholic, provides a moral and contextualised background to my research. If Aboriginal cultures are God-given and loved, as stated in *Lumen Gentium* and specified in this speech, where is Jesus to fit within these cultures? Pope John Paul II referred repeatedly to the antiquity of Aboriginal cultures. How long then have these cultures been conversant with spirit, and surely it must follow, with Jesus Christ?

One of the closing lines calls poignantly:

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.²¹

Reception of the Address

Pope John Paul II staked the integrity of the Church on reception of Aboriginal input. Yet Christian Aboriginal writers continue to argue that the Church is culturally exclusive:

Aboriginal people have not in the past been given the tools, the freedom or the encouragement to develop contextual theology so that they can propagate the faith in ways that are meaningful to the life experience of people hearing the good news.

²⁰Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

²¹Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

Rather, a Church-style assimilation policy has tried to evangelise Aboriginal people into the Western church, rather than recognising under God a unity in diversity.²²

In some churches, the old Christian colonisation continues. Pastors and priests continue to impose on our people a European expression of the Christian message as though this were the only valid expression of the truth... Because we respect our European and Western Christian leaders, we want to help them come to a fresh understanding of Christianity which is faithful to the Scriptures-and is also genuine Good News for all people. It is our hope that these Christian leaders will be able to see the damage they are doing and free themselves from the European cultural bondage in which their theology is imprisoned.²³

Outside dedicated organisations such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, and significant dates, there are few visible indications of promotion of Aboriginal contribution to the Catholic Church.

In this colonised country with its colonised Christianity, it is ethically incumbent, if nothing else, upon non-Aboriginal Christians to listen to, and learn from, Aboriginal Christians. We must examine and celebrate the diversity mentioned by Pattel-Gray, and articulated by the Papal address and by *Lumen Gentium*. This diversity is the concept underpinning my research question. How do we all see the Christ figure? What can non-Aboriginal Christians learn from how the Christ figure is seen by Aboriginal communities today? What is the mandate to examine our perceptions of Christ? Many Aboriginal writers feel it stems from our missionary history. Skye writes:

We have been presented through colonialism with an Imperialistic Christian theology that has denied the culture/theology/spirituality of Australian Indigenous peoples...they preached a Biblical hermeneutic that did not contribute to their wholeness... how could it possibly bring wholeness to anyone else (?). Immersed in

²²Sue Williamson, "From mission to Church" in *Martung upah: black and white Australians seeking partnership*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (Blackburn: HarperCollinsReligious, 1996), 79.

²³ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology* (Blackburn: HarperCollins, 1997), 5-6.

their blind superiority, theirs was a mission of irony that succeeded in contributing to the annihilation of those they intended to save.²⁴

This identification of a lack of ability for colonial Christianity to effect wholeness resonates poignantly with the Pope's speech on committing to the wholeness of the church, and the vitality of Aboriginal contribution.

Skye summarises, the Aboriginal women of Australia had received a phantom, paradoxical, intrinsically violent and unhealthy Christology from colonialism...²⁵

Pastor George Rosendale writes, 'the missionaries never ... helped us to renew our culture. They damaged our culture and they damaged us with it, and we are stuck with the consequences today.'²⁶

It is not difficult to find historical accounts of Church behaviour that appal contemporary readers, nor is it difficult to find anger and pain at the impact of Pattel-Gray's 'heretical Christology'. Yet Skye, Rosendale and Pattel-Gray are practising Christians. They condemn past practices, but they do not seek to abandon or destroy the religion, rather transform. They ask non-Aboriginal people to join with them in condemning past visions of Christ that have caused pain, and to seek a new one. Missionary history, and the damage it vested on communities is a vital reason for this research.

²⁴ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 47.

²⁵ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 19.

²⁶ George Rosendale, "Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians" in *Indigenous Australia: a Dialogue About the Word Becoming Flesh in Aboriginal Churches*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, & John Brown (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 25.

Calls from Aboriginal voices

As well as writing and educating, Aboriginal voices urge explicitly to learn from them, join with them, and understand their colonised journey. Sherry Balcombe, leader of Aboriginal Catholic ministry in Melbourne, stated:

Today we try and share the sacredness of our gifts with all of Australia and with the Catholic Church as it enriches and deepens everyone's connection with God. At times it is a struggle as many have no concept of our connection to the Land and our Lores; and because they have book learning they think theirs is the only way.²⁷

Adnyamathanha pastor Denise Champion, the first Aboriginal woman to be ordained in South Australia, and recently awarded an honorary doctorate in theology, writes:

...the wider church needs to work with indigenous people to bring about a greater respect and value for Aboriginal cultures through reconciliation and covenanting so as to affirm the dignity of indigenous Christians.²⁸

Pattel-Gray supports this call to hear from Aboriginal people:

Aboriginal women have long been active in the Australian church...yet, we have been excluded from both participation and leadership in our own churches. Our voices have not been heard, and we are pushed to the periphery, or 'forgotten' altogether.²⁹

The Rainbow Spirit Elders, a diverse group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander religious leaders who collaborated to explore Aboriginal Christianity, write:

²⁷ Sherry Balcombe, "Aboriginal spirituality," *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 12, no. 2 (2002), 3.

²⁸ Denise Champion with Rosemary Dewerse, *Yarta wandatha* (Salisbury: Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, 2014), 8.

²⁹ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 177.

Because we respect our European and Western Christian leaders, we want them to come to a fresh understanding of Christianity...it is our hope that these Christian leaders will be able to see the damage they are doing and free themselves from the European cultural bondage in which their theology is imprisoned.³⁰

I learned most of what was in the Bible from the old people. The stories I learned from the whites; the deep meanings I learned from the old people. But it has been a battle to convince people that I have something important to share with the rest of the church from our culture. White people in the church leadership do not listen... Our people cannot learn from white people; they have to learn from us as we find Christ in our culture.³¹

Skye commented:

...the hegemonic Church culture in Australia is reluctant to support (aspects) of Indigenous/Christian inculturation theology. We still practice this understanding in our spiritual lives but it is not officially recognised in Church practice and liturgy. It is important that we as *Tiddas* theologians firmly petition the Church for respect of this understanding that stems from our spiritual ontology and spiritual relationship with God, Jesus and Creation. We are then making a stand in cultural reconstruction, resistance and solidarity, developing our own inculturation/liberation theology.³²

This positioning of Aboriginal people at the helm of their own theological articulation responds to the Papal Address but also is a basic requirement of the respect that has not been evident in past Church activity.

Rosendale writes, 'In our culture we have the smoking ceremony as a symbol of penitence and cleansing. It hurts me when I see people using it who do not know what it means. There

³⁰ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 6.

³¹ Rosendale, "Telling our stories" in *Indigenous Australia*, 10.

³² Lee Miena Skye, *Yiminga (Spirit) calling: a study of Australian Aboriginal Christian women's Creation theology* (NSW: University of Sydney, 2004), 145.

has to be a message behind each ceremony. So before the smoking ceremony is used in baptism or the Eucharist, the people must be taught what it means.’³³

This reminds me of an incident in South Australia, where Catholic Aboriginal people were told they could hold a smoking ceremony, but must move it outside the cathedral.

Rosendale’s words, for me, reflect something I see daily in my work life and almost as often in Church life: people who want to show publicly that they have Aboriginal input into their institutions. However they do not want to consult, spend time learning any words, learn how to correctly participate in the smoking ceremony, learn protocols or basic manners such as asking permission to film, or have Aboriginal ceremony inside a cathedral. It calls to mind Skye’s statement that ‘imperialism is alive and well in non-Indigenous understanding of inculturation.’³⁴

I cannot imagine walking into a traditional Catholic baptism, walking up to the altar and starting to film, yet non-Aboriginal people do this at ceremony all the time, as if it’s a show for tourists. There are so many small gestures, when sincerely meant and followed-up on, that can mean all the difference. There can be ongoing searches to engage and learn more fully.

Pattel-Gray writes:

If Australian churches are to be faithful to the Christian commitment participation by marginalised groups takes priority over a system which excludes them from participating. That is, the survival of Aboriginal people-as measured by land rights,

³³ Rosendale, “Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians” in *Indigenous Australia*, 25.

³⁴ Lee Miena Skye, *Australian Aboriginal Catholic women seek wholeness: hearts are still burning* (Pacifica: Journal of the Melbourne College of Divinity, Oct 2006), 288.

health, education, employment, justice, and many other living standards-take priority over the comfort (indeed luxury) of contemporary Australian society.³⁵

In the context of this thesis, Catholic commitment must look like active listening to marginalised and silenced voices.

A gap in non-Aboriginal knowledge

As will be discussed in the literature review section, there is little published work examining the position of Christ as perceived in Aboriginal communities, especially in a pre-invasion sense. I sought to fill this gap in non-Aboriginal knowledge by researching the Christ figure from my own Catholic position, one that does not stand in an informed position regarding Aboriginal views on Christianity and can only benefit from this gap being examined. The aim of exploring this gap was to understand more about the contextualised Jesus in Aboriginal communities and identify shared areas on which to build bridges in faith between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Catholic communities. Another aim was to seek ways in which Aboriginal Christianity could inform a wider range of parishes and assist us to become more inclusive and reflective of local Aboriginal cultures (where they wish to do so).

Taking Pope John Paul II's Address as my frame, with its call to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians, I explored the form the Christ figure takes in Aboriginal communities. This Address is vital to Australian Catholic people as it is a blueprint for our faith in action; the faith through which lens I view this research question.

³⁵Anne Pattel-Gray, *Through Aboriginal eyes: the cry from the wilderness* (WCC Publications: Geneva, 1991), 89.

I briefly return to *Lumen Gentium* that underpins the Address as the wider foundational document. The ‘customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself’ recognises and affirms the diversity of Christian expression across the globe. In the Australian context, I read it as verification that Aboriginal understanding of faith and Jesus Christ must be allowed to be expressed as per the ideas and experiences of Aboriginal cultures rather than through the lens of others, like Western Christians. This will validate the diverse forms of spiritual expression, minimising the traditional Catholic preferencing of Western, Anglo-Saxon forms of Christianity. Thus Aboriginal believers, non-Aboriginal believers (who have the opportunity to be exposed to sophisticated theology millennia in development) and the Vatican documents to which I, as a Catholic, am morally bound to observe will be affirmed.

The document also stresses that the people of God must exist across the earth and across all ages; it also mentions the Spirit of Jesus being sent several times. These concepts resonate with beliefs I found among Aboriginal peers regarding their people’s pre-invasion experiences of the Spirit of Jesus, and provide the basis for examination of these concepts expressed in Aboriginal experiences while aligning with the Vatican concept.

[My location in this research](#)

I was raised and remain a committed Catholic, with a particular devotion to the ‘preferential option for the poor’ as articulated by Father Perro Arrupe and Pope Benedict. I was taught Catholic doctrine in complete isolation from Aboriginal traditions. As an adult, I perceived

the lack of Aboriginal representation in every parish I was associated with, despite being on Kurna land with a religious history dating back at least 65,000 years.³⁶³⁷

When I first came across the works of Aboriginal theologians Anne Pattel-Gray and Lee Miena Skye, dealing comprehensively with the violent and genocidal practices of the Church in Australia, I became committed to listening to the voices of Aboriginal people in spiritual discipleship, with encouragement from Aboriginal leaders and some Catholic priests. The reason for this was threefold; I saw grace in Aboriginal religious views as starkly as in my own tradition; in acknowledgement of the theologies developed over many more millennia than my own church's history, and particular to this location, and as a commitment to attempt to redress injustice in the name of my Church and my ancestors. Acknowledging this theological history, Catholic priest Denis Edwards writes, 'Australian local churches need to learn to approach Aboriginal experience of the land with humility, and as apprentices in faith.'³⁸

I have worked as an educator in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, and as a government advisor on education, for twenty years. In my work in the public sector, I have worked with Aboriginal students from the beginning of my career. I am currently employed as an Aboriginal Education teacher and teacher of the Aboriginal language Kurna, and work with Aboriginal students and communities to support education, culture, language, and

³⁶ "Evidence of first peoples," Defining Moments, National Museum of Australia (2020), <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/evidence-of-first-peoples>.

³⁷ Kurna people, and those of other nations, tell me their people have been here since the beginning of time, or Creation.

³⁸ Denis Edwards, *Called to be Church in Australia: an approach to the renewal of local churches* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1989), 11.

wellbeing. This work has deepened my commitment to working for justice and equality for Aboriginal peoples in all arenas.

I have also worked in the Catholic sector, where Aboriginal representation among the student body is markedly lower. Excellent theological programmes, especially staff professional development courses, exist regarding Aboriginal spirituality, decolonising Catholicism, and reconciliation, providing fertile ground on which to further build non-Aboriginal Catholic experience. My experiences of listening to Aboriginal expressions of belief in Jesus Christ have instilled a firm conviction in me that there is much to learn from Aboriginal spirituality. This is affirmed by the mandate to do so provided by *Lumen Gentium*, yet this particular area is relatively unexplored by non-Aboriginal Australians in Catholic and public educational sectors.

Observing cultural elements



Figure 1.1: *Together Woven*. Sculpture by Marijana Tadic and Alexis West. Author's own image, November 2020. Standing near the beginning of the dingo songline, and pointing to culturally-significant site Kangaroo Island, this sculpture recognises the ownership of the Kurna communities. Information provided by Jack Kanya Buckskin, interview with author, November 2020.

Writing this thesis on Kurna country, there are certain cultural elements I have consciously incorporated into my project. The most foundational element is working along a songline.

The *kadli* (dingo) songline travels from Mawson Lakes in Adelaide, through Alice Springs, all the way up to Arnhem Land. A songline is typically understood by non-Aboriginal people to be a geographical connection across country, stories linking communities in a linear sense.

Kurna community leader and cultural mentor Jack Kanya Buckskin adds depth and dimension to this understanding. 'Songlines are relationships with other people,' he says,

explaining that people pass on a story and follow it until it gets to the end, trading at the same time.³⁹

Kurna/Narungga mentor Jaylon Pila Newchurch and Buckskin indicated the *kadli* songline to me on a map.⁴⁰ Far from being one line traversing the continent, the songline is a highly intricate network of interconnecting sections that emanates in all directions as it makes its way north and south. It would be almost impossible to portray on a map, a point agreed by Buckskin and Newchurch. I consciously chose interviewees from this songline in the interests of coherence and respect for the land on which I write, and because the songline's structure to me reflects the non-linear interconnectedness of people, community, and spirit. All the expressions of Christology from the interviewees in this project are linked by their shared engagement with a common songline.

Buckskin also explains that several language groups on this songline can understand each other's languages and share some spiritual concepts.⁴¹ Language groups are extremely complex. Within South Australia, one of the five main language groups in South Australia is *Thura Mura*. Within this group is the *Miru* group, and within the *Miru* group is the *Kadli* group. The *Kadli* group is comprised of three nations; *Kurna*, *Narungga*, and *Ngadjuri*. Within the *Kurna* nation are several nations (*yarta*) again. This extremely simplistic rendering of a complex system is to illustrate the diversity of experiences and opinions to be found. Most Aboriginal people, either despite or because of the missionary history of this

³⁹ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, June 2018.

⁴⁰ Jaylon Newchurch, interview with author, June 2018.

⁴¹ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, June 2018.

country/countries, are not Christian, so the sample is already small. In addition, Buckskin explains:

These (*yarta*) are not (structurally) clans, or tribes. There is no one leader to speak for all *Kaurna Miyurna* (*Kaurna* people). But the heads of these can form a decision-making collective.⁴²

This concept overlaps into the structure of my data collection. The interviewees bring a wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom to this thesis. No one interviewee claims to speak for all Aboriginal people, however, only for themselves, sometimes their community, and their experiences.

Terminology

Responding to P's invitation, and honouring the individual cultures and their spiritual traditions, required learning certain protocols accepted by each group with which I worked. A main component of these protocols was terminology.

I will honour these preferences to the best of my ability through consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group introduced below, and through interview questions. Examples, excluding terms in the nation's own language, include appropriate terms for the now-discounted 'Dreaming' such as worldview or locally-preferred terms for ancestral heroes/beings/Creator spirits/spirit people. The term 'Dreaming' insinuates a lack of

⁴² Jack Buckskin, interview with author, June 2018.

substance, while the term 'Dreamtime' infers a finite time; this period of creativity and being with the ancestors is an ongoing experience of the present.⁴³

I will use local language where preferable and possible, for example, *munaintya* is the appropriate word on Kurna Country.

While the term 'Indigenous' refers to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in daily life my friends and colleagues ask that I refer to mainland nations as Aboriginal, as Aboriginal and Islander cultures wish to be respectfully distinct from one another. Given that my research will involve candidates in this category, I use the term 'Aboriginal' throughout this document in acquiescence to this request. The term 'Aborigine' is no longer considered appropriate and the term 'Aboriginal person/people' will be used instead.

I use the term 'pre-invasion' to refer to times before 1788 (or later for many groups), due to education from Aboriginal authorities and as an expression of correct political and military history. I avoid the term 'pre-contact', as peaceful trading between Indigenous and other nations existed before English invasion. I also avoid the term 'settlement', as Australia was already settled prior to the arrival of the English. 'Settlers' is not used, as the term 'invaders' is preferred by those whom I consulted.

Elders will be referred to with a capital letter in accordance with current convention among the Kurna community on whose land I write. The word 'Country' will also be capitalised as

⁴³ Rhanee Lester, interview with author, August 22, 2020.

befits the proper noun it is seen as, as per the current grammatical convention among the Aboriginal communities with whom I engaged for this project.

Where the word 'language' is used, it refers to the Aboriginal language of the context. For example, 'On Arrernte Country, Mia gave the word for Holy Spirit in language'. 'Language' is generally used as a noun for the local language among Aboriginal communities.

Where Aboriginal English is used by participants, I retain these words and grammatical features. This is to honour the history of Aboriginal English and its current use as a legitimate mode of communication, and to respect the speaker. Examples include the word 'fullas' and alternative use of subject-verb agreement:

We typically strive to keep the voice of the participant intact, including grammatical idiosyncrasies.⁴⁴

I mostly use the term 'continent' rather than Australia, as Aboriginal people (and others, including myself) recognise a multitude of diverse countries existing on this continent, rather than one huge one. In this context, where the project will be dealing with communities from different nations, the term 'Australia' becomes misleading. Individual nations often capitalise their names and Country, for example, Kurna Country. This convention is adopted for this project.

⁴⁴ Greg Guest, Kathleen MacQueen, & Emily Namey, 2014, "Validity and Reliability (Credibility and Dependability)" in *Qualitative Research and Data Analysis* in *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 19.

I appreciate that the terms 'black' and 'white' are not used across all Aboriginal nations. Their occasional inclusion in this thesis occurs where these terms fall within standard Aboriginal protocol of the relevant community.

Where I talk about the dingo songline, I have adopted standard local Kurna conventions regarding capitalisation and compound words. Different communities may vary these conventions.

The terms nations, people, communities or language groups are used to refer to different cultural groups, as structurally Aboriginal societies are not clans or tribes.⁴⁵

Aboriginal Reference Group

I wish to advise Aboriginal readers that the names of people who have passed since 2017 appear in this section.

An Aboriginal Reference Group was formed as a way to stay accountable to the Aboriginal community, and ensure that the project was conducted in accordance with local protocols and ethically according to local Aboriginal perspectives.

I gathered the group from friends and colleagues who had independently expressed an interest in the project, except for two individuals, who I approached as personal friends whose input I valued.

⁴⁵ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, January 2018.

The group represents community members from a diverse range of backgrounds, including CEOs, educators, and youth mentors. With the exception of three members, the group was spread along the dingo songline and was made up of the following members:

Kira Yaltu Bain (Ngarrindjeri nation)

Wendy Kartanya Benton (Wiradjuri nation)

Jack Kanya Buckskin (Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri nations)

David Byrnes (Latji Latji nation)

Narisha Cash (Jingili/Mudburra nations)

Nakia Ellis (Ngarrindjeri nation)

Uncle Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith (Kurna/Narungga nations)

Tammy Karpany (Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri nations)

Jonathan Lindsay-Tjapaltjarri Hermawan (Pintupi/Luritja/Bundjalung nations)

Doug Milera (Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri nations)

Jaylon Pila Newchurch (Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri nations)

Daniel Roberts (Ngarrindjeri nation)

Robert Taylor (Ngarrindjeri nation)

Rhane Lester (Adnyamathanha nation)

Luke Wilson (Kurna/Narungga/Ngarrindjeri nations)

The nature of this group's role in the project is discussed further in the Methodology section.

Outline of chapters

In the next chapter, the literature review, I will evaluate previous research that interacts with my topic. The review will expose the lack of published information and thus its inaccessibility to non-Aboriginal audiences. It follows then that the existing body of literature will be increased by this research into Aboriginal contextualisations of Christ. This work being primarily to inform non-Aboriginal audiences does not seek to infer that this knowledge does not already exist among Aboriginal communities. The gap in knowledge rests with non-Aboriginal interested groups. The difference is in preferred media and oral versus written traditions, but factors such as multilingualism, education, relationships, and private knowledge are also present.

Chapter Three, Reflexive Ethnography, will discuss my chosen methodology, including the approach I incorporated to obtain and analyse the data, noting what needed to be adjusted in my process in response to cultural and linguistic factors. I will discuss the sacred space concept I adapted to facilitate calm and effective data collection, along with the teaching imparted to me along the way by interviewees on how to create and maintain sacred space on country.

Chapter Four will examine the Catholic context from which this thesis emerges and includes a brief history of the Church's treatment of Aboriginal issues, along with the introduction of selected Catholic theologians who informed my thinking for the project.

Chapters Five through Eight present the analysed data from across the dingo songline. The chapters are organised according to common areas of belief among participants, describing how they view Jesus. Chapter Five, titled 'The eternal presence of Jesus on Country,' details Aboriginal perspectives on the presence of Jesus in Aboriginal societies since the beginning of time. Chapter Six, 'A cosmic Christ with the people,' reveals beliefs about how Jesus engages with Creation and the roles he assumes when walking among Aboriginal people. Chapter Seven, 'Wisdom and the cosmic Christ', looks at participant knowledge around areas that resonate with the Western Wisdom tradition and understandings of the cosmic Christ's relationship to Creation. Chapter Eight, titled 'Black Jesus,' presents the (non-exhaustive) ways in which the targeted communities inculturate Jesus Christ, and how he is expressed.

Chapter Nine, '*Yurikaityarrinthi*', connects the results back to the Papal address and *Lumen Gentium*. I will discuss key implications for the non-Aboriginal Church and make suggestions for further research and opportunities.

I close this section with a statement from one of the participants in this project – simply identified as 'P' – who grew up in areas that continue to be highly impacted by mission today:

Good intentions aside (as they are irrelevant), missionaries most certainly do not preach the love of God nor the values of Christ. They preach a false doctrine underpinned by colonial race and cultural superiority mindsets – believing that First Nations cultures, traditions and peoples are ungodly, uncivilised and need their so-called 'gift' of salvation. Missionaries do not bring Good News, they bring news of fear, damnation, judgment and genocide.

They fear Aboriginal cultures and traditions because they do not understand them, embrace them nor participate in them – meaning that they do not value them. And

yet these very traditions and continued connections to the Source of Life has kept the people strong to this very day!

Creator Altjirre God was already here and has been here for tens of thousands of years – missionaries did not bring him! The Good News? First Nations peoples have continued to thrive and survive in close relationship with the Creator and have been the closest true and continuing custodians of Creation to this very day.

First Nations civilisations, traditions and cultures are more Godly, more spiritual, speak to the heart of Creator Altjirre God and the messages of love more than any of the world's organised religions.

But sadly, the wrong people are still preaching.
And they're still preaching the same rotten shit.⁴⁶

The inferred invitation is for non-Aboriginal Christians to become educated about Aboriginal Christologies, accept that mission, being flawed, resulted in damaging doctrines, and address the gap that exists when Aboriginal voices are not embraced. The enthusiasm of P for the truth of his faith systems will permeate the coming chapters.

⁴⁶ P, interview with author, September 22, 2019.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature review

Indigenous people are the primary and most authentic sources of our own cultures and experiences.⁴⁷

Ambelin Kwaymullina

Palyku writer and law academic

Because this project focuses on Aboriginal knowledge, not non-Aboriginal people's representation of it, I have chosen to mainly explore Aboriginal writers in my literature review. This honours the recommendations of the scholars listed in the Methodology section following, where this rationale will be further explored. While I will acknowledge and summarise non-Aboriginal work in the area, I specifically wanted to stay faithful and committed to the concept I have heard so often in my work and personal life, that "Aboriginal people do not need white people to speak or explain for us."⁴⁸ It is true that in this project I will listen to, but not speak for. While I am responding to the call from Aboriginal peoples to learn from them, it is appropriate that his literature review privileges Aboriginal voices.

A non-Aboriginal commentator, Professor Harry Blagg, introduces the argument to be made in the methodology chapter:

...in regard to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, Anglo-Australians ... do not know or understand aspects of Aboriginal social reality and, more importantly, [they]... cannot make sense of things from an Indigenous world

⁴⁷ Ambelin Kwaymullina, "Research, ethics, and Indigenous peoples: an Australian Indigenous perspective on three threshold considerations for respectful engagement," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12, no. 4 (December 2016), 446.

⁴⁸ Jack Buckskin, Cultural training session (Adelaide: Tauondi Aboriginal College, August 2018).

view by simply extending [their] ... own brand of reason to cover the Indigenous world.⁴⁹

My broad research question focussed on where the Christ figure sits – how he is inculturated – in Aboriginal communities. Determining whether Jesus is seen by Aboriginal communities as existing in Australian nations before European invasion forms the basis of my literature review, as this essential understanding has an inextricable effect on placement of the Christ figure in current Aboriginal ontologies. However, I will also touch on the limited published material referring to the nature of Jesus in an Aboriginal context.

Limitations

As will be illustrated, there is a very small published field of literature regarding the position of Christ in pre-invasion Aboriginal nations. This is noted by Skye:

I noticed very little had been written in this area in Australia (Christian black feminist literature)...my lifelong experience as an Aboriginal Christian woman made me aware that there was so much to be written, not only because of the uniqueness of the knowledge, but also its healing value.ⁱ

While Skye is writing specifically about Aboriginal women's Christologies, her observation is relevant as an Aboriginal academic decrying the lack of published literature in a field of Aboriginal Christology.

⁴⁹ Sjharn Leeson, Catrin Smith and John Rynne, "Yarning and appreciative inquiry: the use of culturally appropriate and respectful research methods when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australian prisons," in *Methodological innovations* 9 (March 2016), 2.

There are very few published works dedicated to the exact location of the Christ-figure in Aboriginal worldviews. Broadly, available literature either reflects an understanding of Christ as a figure present with God before invasion – a similar or identical figure to spirit people – or as an introduced figure distinct from pre-invasion beliefs but synergetic with these beliefs.

The historical Jesus was a man who lived and died in ancient Palestine millennia ago. However, the Catholic understanding of his non-temporal, ethereal and cosmic place as the Christ in the Holy Trinity resonates within Aboriginal expression of spiritual beings, or the distinct Spirit of Jesus, in relationship with a Supreme Being or Creator, as will be articulated in subsequent chapters. It has been difficult to find writers articulating their position on Jesus specifically in this context.

A culturally-responsive limitation was that some non-Aboriginal writers, such as WEH Stanner, discussed below, include information that is restricted by Aboriginal communities. My Aboriginal Reference Group guided me on what material was inappropriate for me to access, particularly where it related to gender-based ceremony. Some books were turned over to the appropriate people in the community for safekeeping, as this knowledge is not only private, but not necessary for the non-initiated to know. This exposure of sensitive material limited the amount of literature I could access with integrity.

A brief review of non-Aboriginal writing

Before considering published literature by Aboriginal scholars, I will briefly note that while non-Aboriginal people have written about Aboriginal spirituality, the possibility of Jesus Christ existing before invasion of the continent is not considered. This is essentially because those writing have believed that Christ only arrived in this continent with Christianity.

Australian anthropologist WEH Stanner is renowned for his work with Aboriginal peoples during the 1960s and 1970s, and famously criticised Australia for trying to bury the true atrocious history of colonisation at a time when it was impolitic to do so. Yet all his time with communities led him to the conclusion that:

The Aborigines have no gods, just or unjust, to adjudicate the world. Not even by straining can one see in [ancestral heroes] the true hint of a Yahweh...the ethical insights are dim and somewhat coarse...One can find in them...no notion of grace or redemption...⁵⁰

Rev. Dr. Frank Fletcher, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart with extensive experience working in a NSW Aboriginal community, wrote *Jesus and the Dreaming*, in which he focuses on Aboriginal relationship to Christ through shared suffering, but not a Christ-figure with its genesis in Aboriginal culture. Jesuit Father John Wilcken was a professor of theology who wrote extensively on Aboriginal spirituality and sacraments, and compared them to Catholicism. However he felt that while some things, like acknowledgement of the divine in

⁵⁰ William Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Schwartz Publishing Pty, Limited, 2011), 51-52.

Creation, were shared, ultimately Aboriginal people needed to adapt to western Christianity, and that Christianity was definitely introduced, writing that Christianity adds a new dimension to existing spirituality.⁵¹ Another extensive writer on Aboriginal spirituality and justice is fellow Jesuit Father Frank Brennan. Qualified in theology and law, he lectures and publishes widely in the area of legal rights for Aboriginal peoples, especially land rights. He does not however, touch on Aboriginal ideas about Jesus Christ.

Norman Habel, like myself, writes on Kurna Country. In his influential book, *Reconciliation: searching for Australia's soul*, published in 1994, he seeks points of connection between Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality, but describes as starkly different the experiences of people at a Church sacrament and an Aboriginal ceremony, placing his Christian approach as other than the Aboriginal experience.⁵² Anthropologist Diane Bell, who has worked extensively with the Ngarrindjeri people and supported their Native Title claim against the devastating Hindmarsh Island development in South Australia, has published on Ngarrindjeri faith but not overtly asking questions around recognition of Jesus Christ before invasion.

Ethnographer Deborah Rose Bird similarly did not publish on the existence of Jesus Christ within preinvasion Aboriginal worldviews in her extensive publishing. Another contemporary voice in non-Aboriginal Australian Christianity is Chris Budden, introduced in the preceding chapter. His excellent works respect and acknowledge Aboriginal claims of relationship with God, but do not discuss exploration of a Jesus Christ relationship within a preinvasion context.⁵³

⁵¹ John Wilcken, "Eschatology and Aboriginal Religious Traditions" in *Australasian Catholic Record* vol. 80, no 4 (Oct 2003), 473.

⁵² Norman Habel, *Reconciliation: searching for Australia's soul* (NSW: HarperCollins, 1999), 98.

⁵³ Budden, *Following Christ in invaded space*, 4.

A 2011 thesis published on Kurna land, about nearby Adnyamathanha Country, does discuss the researcher's conversations with people about God and a possible name for Jesus, but does not investigate the Jesus aspect further.⁵⁴ Some places, such as Arrernte communities, have several names for Jesus Christ; some describe him from an Aboriginal perspective, and some from a non-Aboriginal perspective.⁵⁵ It is these former that I will investigate.

Max Charlesworth, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University, Victoria, is a well-known professor in religion. He edited a book on Aboriginal spirituality, drawing on the work of established authors in the field (including Stanner, Bell, Rose and Brennan). Interestingly, the book did not include any Aboriginal authors. This collection did not address the issue of a pre-invasion Jesus Christ. Christianity was described, where mentioned, as an introduced and discrete concept from existing Aboriginal systems that was sometimes accommodated.⁵⁶

The lack of evidence I found for this discussion does not mean that the area has not been touched on in the course of research by these well-known and well-researched writers. However, if anything has been previously published on the area of an Aboriginal Jesus Christ present before invasion, I am yet to locate it.

⁵⁴ Tracy Spencer, *White lives in a black community: the lives of Jim Page and Rebecca Forbes in the Adnyamathanha community* (PhD Thesis, SA: Flinders University, 2011), 67-68.

⁵⁵ This is non-published material, but information that was taught to me by a participant.

⁵⁶ Maxwell Charlesworth (ed), *Religious business: essays on Australian Aboriginal spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

One common Creator God

It is important to note the commonly-expressed belief that the Judeo-Christian God is recognised as present in pre-invasion Aboriginal nations. This is important to note given the Catholic indivisibility of Jesus and God as articulated in the Trinity.

Pattel-Gray identifies God as being synonymous with the Creator Spirit located in Aboriginal worldviews:

Our entire worldview is centred around Ancestral relationships between the Creator and Creation...As a few of our people come into contact with post-colonial and liberation theologies from the East and South, we begin to reflect upon the fact that our own Indigenous theology-which we have been “living” for millennia-is in fact speaking the same language... We have known the Creator from the beginning.⁵⁷

Champion also recognises the Judeo-Christian God as the pre-invasion Spirit of her people, writing, ‘I’ve come to know and see that God was always in this place, before the missionaries came and presented God to us.’⁵⁸ For Nyungar elder Elizabeth Pike, the European-brought God and Aboriginal Creator Spirit are also one and the same. She writes:

Aboriginal people who have adopted Christian beliefs see that the Creator Spirit who gave them their law through the Dreaming is the same God who gave the Hebrew people their law. It may amaze some people to know that we were given the law thousands of years before Abraham.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Anne Pattel-Gray, *Ochre spirits: ancestral spirits* (Melbourne: Dove, 1996), 49-50, 56.

Anne Pattel-Gray, *Through Aboriginal eyes*, 1-6.

⁵⁸ Champion, *Yarta wandatha*, 187.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Pike, *The power of story: spirit of the Dreaming* (Victoria: John Garratt Publishing, 2011) 15.

Yankunytjatjara elder Bob Randall wrote of his education that he realised 'Aboriginal teachings were the same as things Jesus had said...I...eventually accepted that there was a consciousness of Oneness, of Godness.'⁶⁰ Ngarrindjeri woman Maggie Jacobs acknowledges that the Christian God was present pre-invasion, saying that 'God has been in Aboriginal people before. They knew about God before...it was only when...Taplin...founded the mission...we had to go to church.'⁶¹ The late Rev Charles Harris, Founding President of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, asserted:

The fact that God was here in this land long before 1788 proves the fallacy of the missionaries who came out and told the Aboriginal People that they were bringing God to us. God was *already here* and with the people...God was here interacting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and they interacted with the Creator God...⁶²

Belief in a preinvasion faith in one supreme Creator is also confirmed by Australian Children's Laureate Boori Monty Pryor, who writes, 'By 'God', I mean the Creator through Aboriginal law...I see that same God in the Christian church. It's our same God, a caring God, that was always with the people.'⁶³ The Kurna peoples of the Adelaide Plains acknowledge a higher Creator, and gave missionaries that name when asked for a word for 'God'.⁶⁴ Kurna Elder Uncle Lewis O'Brien writes that 'Long before the British came to this country, Australia was a spiritual country of a higher order... the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains

⁶⁰ Bob Randall, *Songman: the story of an Aboriginal Elder* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2003), 66.

⁶¹ Maggie Jacobs cited in Diane Bell, *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (Chicago: Spinifex Press, 1998), 110.

⁶² Charles Harris, 'Guidelines for so-called Western civilisation and Western Christianity: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality: God was already here' in *Aboriginal Spirituality: past present future*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, (Victoria: Harper Collins, 1996), 67.

⁶³ Boori Monty Pryor, *Maybe tomorrow* (Australia: Penguin, 1998), 189.

⁶⁴ Lewis O'Brien and Mary-Anne Gale, *And the clock struck thirteen: the life and thoughts of Kurna Elder Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2007), 12.

actually had a word for a higher Creator – Pingyallingyalla.⁶⁵ Buckskin affirms that this is the one universal Creator referred to as God by the Christians who came to Kurna Country.⁶⁶ Yolŋu Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra is a well-known theologian and leader of the Dhurili nation. He is an influential advocate for Aboriginal rights and an advanced initiate in Yolŋu ceremonial law. He writes that ‘...God was already active in Aboriginal people and was already present with our ancestors long before the early missionaries came to our country.’⁶⁷ The Rainbow Spirit Elders concur with the concept of one universal God for Aboriginal and foreign nations, writing:

The various images of the Creator Spirit among different Aboriginal peoples are quite diverse...Behind all of these forms, however, we Christian Aboriginal people believe there is one Creator Spirit who in the Old Testament is variously depicted as the Cannanite Creator, El Elyon, and as the Israelite Redeemer God YHWH.⁶⁸

Baptist church leader Mark Yettica-Paulson acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples “have all got these different names for what we recognise as God the Creator.”⁶⁹ Foreshadowing the next section, he also goes on to question whether Jesus of Nazareth is the same Christ Aboriginal people identify at work in their culture. The Aboriginal experts in that work respond with fascinating material that is outside the scope of this research which seeks knowledge of the nature of the pre-invasion Christ.

⁶⁵ O’Brien, *And the clock struck thirteen*, 12.

⁶⁶ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, 12 March, 2017.

⁶⁷ Djiniyini Gondarra, *Let my people go* (NT: Aboriginal Advisory and Development Services, 1983), iiiv.

⁶⁸ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 31.

⁶⁹ Mark Paulson, “Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians” in *Indigenous Australia*, 26.

Quandamooka woman, Aunty Evelyn Parkin, notes that Aboriginal Christians acknowledge that the God of the Hebrews is the same one who reveals himself to the Aboriginal people of Australia; though, he is known by many names.⁷⁰

Therefore, the above-mentioned Aboriginal authorities agree that the Judeo-Christian God is the same as the Creator Spirit worshipped in Aboriginal nations millennia before European invasion.

Christ as a pre-invasion spirit

The following Aboriginal commentators acknowledge Jesus Christ as a figure existent in pre-invasion Australian nations, usually in some form of cultural context. Some of these statements are tantalisingly brief in print. They were offered without further commentary, constituting part of the reason I needed to meet people to listen further. The statements are offered as enough by the authority of the people making them.

Pattel-Gray quotes Alice Briggs in asserting that ‘as far as Christianity is concerned, well our people’s life was based on Christianity. They knew Christ long before white people ever come to Australia.’⁷¹ Daisy Utemorrah, of the Wunambal nation, describes both God and Jesus as being interchangeable with the host of Wandjinas (spirit beings):

They’re the same those two. The God in Heaven and the Wandjina in the cave are the same. Jesus was a Wandjina. But white people, they call him God. The God in Heaven

⁷⁰ Evelyn Parkin, paper presented to The Christ and Culture: Indigenous theology and spirituality conference, *Living a Dual Life/Faith with Jesus the Christ* (Queensland: National Council of Churches in Australia, 2007), 46.

⁷¹ Pattel-Grey, *Great white flood*, 118.

and the Wandjina in the cave, they're the same, they're one. And Jesus, too. They're all Wandjina, they all made the world.⁷²

Ngarinyin woman Mabel King also positions Jesus within her pre-invasion culture by stating that 'Jesus is a Wandjina, too.'⁷³ Ngarinyin Elder David Mowaljarlie notes that among all the wandjinas, there is one Wandjina, the principal Creator of the land:

God and Wandjina, they're the same. We all talk about one Creator. He created everything. In white man's lingo he calls him God. We call him Wandjina. But you can't explain Wandjina any more than you can explain God. Anthropologists say Wandjina was an Ancestor Being. To us Wnadjina is Wandjina. Wandjina came from the wind and travelled the land and made this earth, and the sea, and the mountains, the rivers, the waterholes, the trees, the plants, the animals, the language, and the people...Wandjina spiritual presence is in all living things. It's in the land itself. And it's in the universe, Ngadja, from where the Creator Wandjina looks over us.⁷⁴

Gondarra writes of a great Ancestral Spirit of the East Arnhem Land people called Djankawu, who 'once lived in the flesh.' Gondarra describes Djankawu as:

Sharing life in common with our people in the Dreamtime. He shared with the them the sacred knowledge of ceremonies, songs, dances and the sacred stories about how things began to form in the universe and on earth. He gave the tribes names and the kinship system, and he taught them many things...He was regarded as a holy sacred being. He revealed himself to the men as one of them; to the women she revealed herself as a mother-figure. He was seen as a divine person, but at the same time, he communicated as a human. He taught our people how to live a life of harmony and humility. He taught them that all living creatures are their friends and that they must care for them. Djankawu gave our people special knowledge to communicate to those creatures. He gave the tribes sacred sites ownership to each individual clan group. He taught the tribes how to look after the land and the seas. He taught them about the holy living and their relationship to mother earth.

⁷² Daisy Utemorrhah cited in Harvey Arden, *Dreamkeepers: a spirit-journey into Aboriginal Australia* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1994), 25.

⁷³ Mabel King cited in Valda Blundell & Sam Woolagoodja, *Keeping the Wandjinas fresh*, (Western Australia: Fremantle Press, 2015), 145.

⁷⁴ David Mowaljarlai cited in Arden, *Dreamkeepers*, 205-6.

When finished in East Arnhem Land, Djankawu went on his way, to give sacred law to other peoples.⁷⁵

While Gondarra does not name this figure as Jesus, the similarities are compelling, particularly the reference to the holy being appearing and communicating as a man. Several links to Genesis, including the conferring stewardship of Creation and the organisation of the 'tribes' are an interesting tangent around the relationship between the cosmic and human-appearing natures of the divine entity.

Catholic theologian, educator and artist Dr. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr of the Ngan'gityemerri people confirmed in a personal conversation with me, that 'Jesus has been here since Creation.'⁷⁶

Interviewing several nations, including Tiwi and East Arrernte women, Skye found a unanimous belief that Christ had 'pre-incarnated' in pre-invasion cultures, as well as a unanimous belief that Jesus was with God, the Ancestors, and Aboriginal peoples from the beginning of Creation.⁷⁷ Skye identifies spiritual beings to whom Jesus' spirit is 'melded', arguing that Jesus is 'one-in-spirit' with the individual, the tribal group, the Ancestors, and all of Creation. Skye found a common belief that Jesus is seen as one with the spiritual beings, and has been with them since the beginning of time.⁷⁸ She reiterates that Christ is

⁷⁵ Djiniyini Gondarra, "Aboriginal spirituality and the gospel" in *Aboriginal Spirituality*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, 44-45.

⁷⁶ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, interview with author, August 2018.

⁷⁷ Skye, *Hearts are still burning*, 291-293.

⁷⁸ Skye, *Hearts are still burning*, 295-297.

widely 'seen as One with the Creator: he was present from the beginning of time, which is stated in the Bible at John 1.⁷⁹

Skye also identifies Jesus explicitly as the primary ancestor, writing that 'within [interviewees'] inculturated theology, a preincarnate Christ is understood to have existed before colonialism, and Jesus is seen as Proto-ancestor...⁸⁰

Skye interviewed Aboriginal women to learn that despite the cruel face of the Church presented through colonisation, these women engaged with the Jesus of their culture to transform Christianity:

The phenomenon is that even though a paradoxical, phantom Christology was presented to the women through Christian colonialism and its legacy, they were able to perceive a Jesus who is one with us in our depths of suffering...empowering us to feel the fullness of joy, freedom and life... Christ is being transformed, is inculturated in faith and revealed through that Indigenous faith...White Christian Christology is being transformed...Jesus becomes one with the full spiritual dimension of each tribal group...Christ therefore becomes one with spirituality, theology, and culture... Christ is one with the Creation and Ancestral stories. Jesus' presence is felt or said to exist at all religious rites and rituals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous...Christ was always believed to be present with Australian Aboriginal people...since before time began, Christianity merely brought us the Jesus story....⁸¹

Skye discusses inculturation of the Christ figure into Aboriginal nations and spiritualities, presented as a sense of recognition rather than a new theological concept. She acknowledges diversity among her samples, writing that while most people believe that Jesus and God co-existed in Australia before invasion, some do feel that Jesus added a new

⁷⁹ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 50.

⁸⁰ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 197-198.

⁸¹ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 46.

dimension to their existing 'Dreaming' after colonisation. She goes on to present the finding that while 'the Bible validated (interviewees') experience of Christ...the Bible was not their first introduction to and experience of Christ.'⁸² Skye wrote of an Aboriginal view of Jesus 'present in spirit, united with the Spirit of God, long before the arrival of Christian doctrine. They knew what Christ taught them in spirit, passed down by their Ancestors.'⁸³

Wiradjuri pastor and community leader Cecil Grant (Wungamaa) wrote:

(Initiated men) had the idea of God the Creator. In our Wiradjuri area, he is known as *Biammee*. In other northern tribes he was known as *Boyma* and they had a very clear knowledge of the Son of God. There was also the idea of the Holy Spirit...so they were Trinitarians...

I remember a conversation I had with my grandfather when I was fourteen years of age. We were talking about Jesus, and he astounded me by saying, "Oh yes, he visited our people, *long* time before Cook came sonny, *long* time before white man.' I said. 'You are talking about Jesus?' He said, 'Yes, Son of God-same one. We had another name for him.' ...My grandfather was very clear and very sure about the Son of God.⁸⁴

Grant, while explicitly recognising Jesus Christ as a pre-invasion figure, is the only published writer I found to make the following distinction:

But while we knew the Son of God as Law-giver, we knew the Son of God as judge, we did not know him as Saviour-and that is the heart of Christianity.⁸⁵

⁸² Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 41-48.

⁸³ Skye, "How Australian Aboriginal tiddas (sisters) theologians deal with the threat of genocide" in *Feminist Theology* vol. 23, no.2 (2015), 135.

⁸⁴ Cecil Grant, "Gospel and culture: an Aboriginal perspective" in *Martung Upah*, 163-4.

⁸⁵ Grant, *Martung Upah*, 164-165.

Reverend Doctor George Rosendale was the third Aboriginal person ordained in the Lutheran Church of Australia. He also affirmed the presence of Christ in pre-invasion cultures, by relating a conversation he had with his grandfather:

We were talking about Jesus, and he astounded me by saying, 'Oh yes he visited our people.' I looked at him and said, 'Jesus?' And he said 'Yes!' I said, 'When did this occur, after Cook?' He said, 'Long time before Cook come, sonny, long before white man.' I said, 'You are talking about Jesus?' He said, 'Yes, Son of God-same one. We had another name for him.'⁸⁶

Rosendale explicitly states that Christ, as indivisible from God, had therefore to be existent in pre-invasion Aboriginal cultures, even if his revelation differs from that in the New Testament. For Rosendale, Aboriginal nations recognised facets of Christ as Creator and law-giver through the Rainbow Serpent, which links Aboriginal nations and proceeds from the Supreme Creator and when the Western gospel arrived, recognised the revelation of Jesus as one who is already inherent in their traditions, for whom they were waiting.⁸⁷

Catholic deacon Monty Pryor, a Birri-gubba man, related to historian Noel Loos that "we had Jesus before you whitefellows came." Loos writes that he initially assigned this statement to misunderstanding on Pryor's part. He later came to realise that Pryor was referring to what is now termed in the Western church the 'cosmic Christ', a concept that will be explored in following sections. Loos realised that if God created all things through Christ as part of the Godhead, then this Word of God must have been spoken to Aboriginal people and been present in their culture even if not identified initially as the Jesus of history.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Rosendale, "Telling our stories" in *Indigenous Australia*, 2-3.

⁸⁷ Rosendale, "Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians" in *Indigenous Australia*, 16-25.

⁸⁸ Noel Loos, *White Christ black cross: the emergence of a black church* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 14.

Champion writes about using Adnyamathanha stories to make sense of Christianity:

It's about recognising God and Christ. If we say that God, that Christ, was here from the very beginning of the world, then how was God here in Australia right from the beginning of Creation?⁸⁹

Now in Adnyamathanha as I looked at the stories I realised we had our own word for God. I drew off the knowledge of my old Uncle Ken McKenzie...he always used to talk about *Arrawatanha*, the Most High...and he always used to talk about that person being the central one. *Unda* means one who has come back from the dead.⁹⁰

In talking about Adnyamathanha stories, Champion notes, "The hidden story will come out in you and that's the Christ story that's sitting and waiting. I think we as Adnyamathanha have the long memory of that story."⁹¹

Champion sees Jesus in her people's sacred stories stretching back into the almost unimaginably long theological history of the Adnyamathanha people on their Country.

These writers, then, all agree that the spirit of Jesus existed in pre-invasion Australian nations, despite differing on this nature of this existence. Some believe that the Spirit of Jesus took on flesh as revelation, with many Aboriginal spiritual beings sharing qualities with Jesus, such as Djankawu of the East Arnhem Land, or people who indicate elements of hypostatic union.⁹² Others see him as melded to spiritual beings and/or indivisibly present with or synonymous with God from the beginning of time.

⁸⁹ Champion, *Yarta wandatha*, 8.

⁹⁰ Champion, *Yarta wandatha*, 27.

⁹¹ Champion, *Yarta wandatha*, 29.

⁹² Djiniyini Gondarra, "Aboriginal spirituality and the gospel" in *Aboriginal Spirituality*, ed. Anne-Pattel-Gray, 44-45.

It is finding how Aboriginal people now identify and articulate this Christ that is of interest in this thesis. While reference is made by some writers to the presence of a pre-invasion Christ, I wanted to explore, insofar as it is appropriate for a non-Aboriginal woman to hear, how this figure exists in the hearts and minds of people today.

The nature of Christ's presence

The Wandjina material hints at the cosmic nature of Wandjina, and the dynamic presence of Creation spirit/s existent throughout nature. The stories naming figures who are law-bringers and healers resonate with Western Jesus stories. These would become my points of investigation. With no published work confirming exactly if these nebulous accounts refer to Jesus as present in pre-invasion communities in these forms, I sought to fill this gap by asking exactly how a pre-invasion Jesus Christ appears to communities along the dingo songline. The literature review proved that some communities acknowledge this presence, and stories tantalise with familiar imagery.

Jesus Christ as an introduced figure

Returning to the second category, other Aboriginal writers see Jesus solely as an introduced figure. Nyungar Elder Elizabeth Pike sees Jesus as an imported product of European invasion whose teachings align with Aboriginal values.⁹³ She refers to spiritual beings displaying

⁹³ Pike, *Power of story*, 102-3; 123-128

divine qualities as 'Jesus prototypes'.⁹⁴ Gondarra speaks of preinvasion figures who appear Christ-like, but views Christ as a new element, albeit one that aligns with pre-invasion spiritualities, and one which must be 'planted' and nurtured along Aboriginal lines:

We Aboriginal leaders are called to plant Christ in this Australian soil, rather than transplant Western forms of Christianity...we must promote Christ as the living and acceptable part of our own ceremony, and culture...⁹⁵

Harry Walker, a Goorie man, cites and builds on this idea. He writes of Christ as external, in that he is transplantable, but also has the capacity for local placement and must be expressed in culture by Aboriginal people themselves:

As a Goorie, I believe that Christ, my Lord and king, must be born in Australia, amongst the Goorie church, before the true Christian gospel can take deep root. The question that Jesus asked Peter, and others, namely, '**Who do you say that I am?**' (Mark 8:29) must be answered directly by the Aboriginal People or Aboriginal Christians. This question is directed to our Aboriginal context and cannot be answered by the Western society for us...

Jesus is both local and universal, born and risen. We would like to experience Christ being born in the Aboriginal soil, not just transplanted. It will be a great mistake if we do not allow any place for looking at our culture and faith closely so as to find the great contribution we can offer the Christian faith.⁹⁶

Seeking clarification

Sometimes the concept is not made explicit, as in the following examples. The Rev. Rronang Garrawurra, when discussing scripture, uses words like 'relate'.⁹⁷ Gondarra uses 'compare'

⁹⁴ Pike, *Power of story*, 103.

⁹⁵ Djiniyiny Gondarra cited in Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 63.

⁹⁶ Harry Walker, "Goorie Jesus" in *Aboriginal spirituality*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, 108-109.

⁹⁷ Rronang Garrawurra cited in Anne Pattel-Gray, *Ochre spirits: ancestral spirits* (Melbourne: Dove, 1996), 54.

when talking about Aboriginal practices. The syntax may be implying a belief that Jesus is a European import.⁹⁸

The literature in this field can appear contradictory without benefit of clarifying interview. For example, in line with Western Christian teaching, the Rainbow Spirit Elders claim Jesus as the only human incarnation of the Spirit in any culture (in this particular way). However this revelation of God is representative of the same Aboriginal Creator God as the Western God. Because the Word was made flesh, and all people are of flesh, the Rainbow Spirit Elders argue that Jesus can be hence located as an Aboriginal Australian. They clarify that they believe Jesus' saving power came to all nations, including Aboriginal, after his earthly death and Resurrection.⁹⁹

However they also claim Christ, as the power of the Spirit, is camping with their people from the beginning of time.¹⁰⁰ Rosendale writes of events 'long before Christianity came here' but it can be hard to determine whether he means Christianity in its Western form or in its cosmic sense, of the Logos permeating each culture since Creation.¹⁰¹

This lack of unanimous answers is reminiscent of the universal mystery of faith, including the Catholic belief in the hypostatic union of Jesus and is an argument for Skye's contextualised Christianity; the location of Christ within distinct cultural contexts. Skye argues that people bring different experiences to their perspectives on Christianity, so Christ

⁹⁸ Djiniyini Gondarra cited in Anne Pattel-Gray, *Ochre spirits: ancestral spirits* (Melbourne: Dove, 1996), 54.

⁹⁹ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 58-65.

¹⁰⁰ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 66.

¹⁰¹ Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 12.

cannot possibly be understood by one universal approach to him. Rather, we need to be aware of the multiple issues affecting how Aboriginal (peoples') Christologies are formed and how they differ from white Christologies.¹⁰² Skye writes that "contextual Christologies rather than universality may be our only way of understanding Christ ..."¹⁰³

Grant agrees:

To me the Jesus that is very much in my culture is the real Jesus, not the white Western one...The only way that we can have the Christ that is relevant to us culturally is in our respective cultures.¹⁰⁴

The literature in this field is debated among Aboriginal communities and writers, but the support for Jesus as a purely new concept is limited. Most Aboriginal writers agree on the Spirit of Jesus existing in this land before invasion. My research will therefore seek to describe in more detail exactly where Jesus sits in Aboriginal traditions today, and what the current ramifications are for non-Aboriginal Australian Catholics.

Visions of Jesus Christ in culture

Reverend Gawirrin Gumana, of the Yirritja people, describes a sacred story about Barama, a huge and powerful fearsome man from the time of Creation. He emerged from a waterhole and brought all the people together. He named them and gave them their land and culture, so that they could look after the land and each other.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 37.

¹⁰³ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Cecil Grant, "Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians" in *Indigenous Australia*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Bernard Clarke, *Larrpan ga buduyurr: the spear and the cloud* (South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc, 2010), 5-9.

Tjilbruke, and other creative ancestors of the Kurna people are subordinate to the Creator, Pintyalintyalu or Munaintyarlu.¹⁰⁶ Nyungar Elder Noel Nannup, Palyku professor Ambelin Kwaymullina, and Nyungar writer Tjalamina Mia edited a collection of essays by Aboriginal authors, recording that many other nations acknowledge a common supreme Creator being named according to differing languages.¹⁰⁷

It is worth noting that some writers appreciate similarities between European and Australian religious symbols beyond these major themes. Margaret Heffernan, an Arrernte woman from whom I learned in Alice Springs, writes:

When it came to culture and ways of being in the world, there were plenty of shared ideas between the faith of the church mob and the ancient culture and laws of my own people. A sharing of Creation stories where both talk of relationships between God, people and our land. A shared system of thinking where unchanging laws are handed down from ancient times through rituals and stories. A similar priesthood group of old men taking leadership in interpreting law and culture. The same circles of women fulfilling the central caring and nurturing roles within a constantly changing world...

Even before the church came, before the mission, Aboriginal people believed in *Altyerre*. They knew the *Altyerre*. When the church came, we heard about their God. And it seemed much like the same God that created our own world in the Dreamtime. Over the years we have talked about *Altyerre* and the Creator God we were taught about by the missionaries. We think they are the same. When we talk about the Trinity-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit-we say *Akngeye*, *Alere* and *Utnenge*. When we talk about Jesus we say *Ngkarte* Jesus. *Ngkarte* is our word for *God*...

Altyerre and God are the same, but appear in different forms. Aboriginal people can know the Creation stories and the culture of the church both ways, from our Christian teachings and from the stories passed down in our Aboriginal sacred knowledge. This is because they come from the one beginning...

¹⁰⁶ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, August 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Sally Morgan, Tjalamina Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina (eds.), *Speaking from the heart: stories of life, family, and Country* (North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2007).

Altyerre means the unknown in the same way as God is really unknown...This God makes himself known through Ngkarte Jesus...¹⁰⁸

Champion also worked with non-Aboriginal New Zealand theologian, Rev. Dr. Steve Taylor, on methods of using Aboriginal sacred stories as a way to interpret and reflect on Scripture.

Champion reflected:

(This) approach gives us freedom. It has given me freedom to think outside the box (of Western cultural understandings only of Scripture).¹⁰⁹

Among the fascinating concepts this paper brings forth is the concept of God as Divine Tracker, finder of lost children among the Creation where God is deeply placed to facilitate this finding. This Shepherd metaphor links the main two diverse inculturations of Jesus in a way that inspires and makes clear the way forward for this type of blended Christology.¹¹⁰

Parkin also describes Indigenous Christianity:

My eyes were opened to a wonderful and exciting experience of rediscovering self as an Aboriginal Christian...I began to focus on both spiritualities that work in harmony with each other...adapting to Christianity as an Aboriginal person and not from a western point of view. It is also trying to make things culturally appropriate to present a holistic and fullness approach to life...

Christ in culture (is) on parallel with Christianity, one only needs to look into and beyond to see the Holy Trinity working within Aboriginal culture.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Heffernan with Gerard Waterford and Frances Coughlan, *Gathering Sticks: Lighting Up Small Fires* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2018), 265-6.

¹⁰⁹ Steve Taylor and Denise Champion, paper presented to The Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools Conference, *Jesus as divine tracker: an Indigenous experiment in a post-colonial atonement theology* (Melbourne, July 2016), 20-21.

¹¹⁰ Taylor and Champion, *Jesus as divine tracker*.

¹¹¹ Parkin, *Christ and culture*, 46.

Parkin goes on to point to sacred elements in Aboriginal stories as a demonstration of a way of developing an Indigenous Christology.¹¹² This is a feature of Champion's work, who spoke earlier about Christ memories in culture, and who explores sacred and Christian aspects of Adnyamathanha story.¹¹³

There are also incidences of recorded Aboriginal figures incorporating certain behaviours and qualities that align with European conceptions of Jesus Christ other than the law-giving mentioned above, such as survival of physical death and remaining as a sentient watcher over humanity. This is evident in beliefs about Bunaba resistance warrior Jandamarra, described by Bunaba Elder Banjo Woorunmarra as alive after being murdered, watching and listening to the living people in his Country.¹¹⁴ The Worrorra Wandjina figure Namarali was speared but transformed, continuing to be a presence in his nation's spiritual lives.¹¹⁵ Skye relates a Creation story about a baby coming back to life on the third day, who is to be followed by people when he dies.¹¹⁶ Nyungar Elder Noel Nannup, Palyku professor Ambelin Kwaymullina, and Nyungar writer Tjalaminu Mia edited a collection of essays by Aboriginal authors, many of whom describe spirit beings as having once walked on earth before ascending or moving to a spiritual realm.¹¹⁷ Many other nations describe stories where a common supreme being gives the law to humanity through intermediaries. For example, Nyungar Reverend Sealin Garlett related a pre-invasion flood story, where the Creator sent seven men and women to warn the people to mend their behaviour. They were not heeded,

¹¹² Parkin, *Christ and culture*, 50.

¹¹³ Champion, *Yarta Wandatha* .

¹¹⁴ Banjo Woorunmarra cited in *Dreamkeepers*, 193-5.

¹¹⁵ Blundell and Woolagoodja, *Keeping the Wandjinas fresh*, 141.

¹¹⁶ Skye, *Hearts Still Burning*, 299.

¹¹⁷ Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina (eds.), *Heartsick for Country: stories of love, spirit, and Creation* (North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2007).

and the rains were sent to ensure proper law was followed from then on.¹¹⁸ This obviously reflects Noah more than Jesus, but the human with special qualities as intermediary tradition is interestingly consistent.¹¹⁹

These similarities to the Western Jesus stories formed the basis for exploration during interviews.

In conclusion

As noted above, the published literature does not usually directly respond to the research question due to lack of published material, and theological understandings are limited by the nature of static text. A disclaimer I must reiterate here is that this gap in published works does not represent a gap in Aboriginal knowledge or articulation, only a gap in what is available to non-Aboriginal Christians and which I sought to fill for the benefit of that audience.

This literature review revealed to me several recurring elements. A common creative God is recognised between white and black cultures, and the majority of Aboriginal writers believe

¹¹⁸ Len Collard, "Wangkiny Ngulluck Nyungar Nyittiny, Boodjar, Moort and Kaitijin: talking about Creation, Country, family and knowledge of the Nyungar of south-western Australia" in Morgan et al, *Speaking From the Heart*, 272-275.

¹¹⁹ As an interesting aside, in addition to the many ancient flood stories common to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern areas, Australian researchers are becoming increasingly interested in the many pre-invasion Aboriginal flood stories that have survived. Oral tradition teaches that these floods are also as a result of punitive action by the Creator (and Western science is finding, perhaps late in the game, that geographical evidence supports many of these stories). For an example see Adam Brumm, "The Alps, high gods, and the great flood: stone axe exchange and cosmology in Aboriginal south-eastern Australia – a response to Hiscock's 'Beyond the Dreamtime'" in *Australian Archaeology*, 83:1-2 (2017), 56-70.

Jesus Christ to have been present in their Countries before colonisation. The establishment of these premises allowed coherent formulation of areas to explore during interviews.

The references to Jesus Christ existing on this continent before European invasion were asserted strongly enough to justify an area for research; the concept definitely exists for the people speaking in this chapter, and, it follows, by many more unpublished people.

Fascinating descriptions of ancestral or spiritual figures bearing resemblance to Jesus Christ also lent interest to the thesis question of whether Jesus Christ is recognised as being present here beyond the last two centuries. Being unable to locate works that definitively link Jesus Christ to these figures, or explicitly describe Jesus Christ in a pre-invasion cultural setting, with a pre-invasion cultural identity, I determined to research if such a figure exists for the communities involved.

I had as my foundation this shared faith in God, and recognition of Jesus as linked with God and therefore present in this continent, but my questions proceeded from the gap in published literature. Does Jesus Christ have specific pre-invasion identities between nations? Do these identities bear resemblance to the Palestinian Jesus? Is he seen as incarnation? Do these stories of Christlike figures with different names represent Jesus stories? How does he move in people's lives today?

CHAPTER THREE: Reflexive ethnography

Australia, it's time to listen. From the time we connected with Westerners, we have been told we have to learn white ways. We've done all that. It's time for two-way traffic. We need you to learn from us as well.¹²⁰

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr

Ngan'gityemerri Catholic woman

In this chapter, a description of the methodology and its origins will be provided, followed by influences on the methodology. Data collection, data analysis, and ethics will then be outlined and discussed.

Learning about how Jesus Christ is seen by dingo songline communities, an area previously unpublished, necessitated an approach that listened directly to people's experience. This project was qualitative in focus, inviting people's stories and experiences and inductively generating themes. The key approach was active listening via interview technique informed by a commitment to an ideology underpinning the project; that of privileging Aboriginal voices.

Influences

This section will discuss Aboriginal academic influences brought to bear on the ultimate determination of the methodology; primarily pertaining to research methods.

¹²⁰ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, conference address, *At the Edge of the Sacred* (White Gums, NT, 11 August 2018).

New Zealand Indigenous Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes:

From the vantage point of the colonised, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism.¹²¹

She notes, further, that 'Imperialism frames the indigenous experience.'¹²² The research approach was shaped by this critique and my own location close to the Imperial frame. It also informed how my research questions (below) were to be conceptualised and designed. It was important that they, along with how the method was implemented, were not, as far as it was possible, linked with this European colonialism.

A plethora of Aboriginal voices condemn research practices and demand consideration, particularly in light of the participants' histories generally, not to mention personally. In terms of the latter, in remote communities outside Alice Springs, the project engaged some of the most over-researched people in the world. In Adelaide, it engaged people whose lives had been traumatised by intergenerational colonial abuses. Some participants had suffered enforced governmental institutionalisation or lived with families traumatised by substance misuse, domestic violence and other issues common to those devastated by the Stolen Generation abuses. In relation to this project, these issues have precluded some participants' access to the type of academic training that allows defence against the abuses described. An awareness of participant vulnerability in light of the following Aboriginal opinion was necessary.

¹²¹Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 1.

¹²² Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 57.

According to Narungga/Kurna Elder Uncle Stephen Goldsmith, aside from other imperial atrocities inflicted on Aboriginal peoples there has been, across Australia, intellectual theft and appropriation of ideas; sacred secret business has been published for inappropriate eyes and research conducted in which Aboriginal knowledge was misrepresented or patronised by white people and published without consultation, credit, or correction¹²³.

Aboriginal academic Ambelin Kwaymullina, of the Palyku people, writes that:

Indigenous peoples have long critiqued the harmful effects of Eurocentric research processes upon Indigenous cultures and communities...Indigenous scholars have identified multiple difficulties inherent within Eurocentric research paradigms...¹²⁴

Kwaymullina goes on to describe 'a failure to hear,' stating that:

The workings of privilege...mean that Indigenous voices are not heard equally; nor do Indigenous voices have an equal opportunity to be heard...the task of the non-Indigenous scholar is not necessarily to add to the commentary but to highlight and support Indigenous voices...¹²⁵

Irene Watson, in Kwaymullina, writes of her reluctance to share information, 'because of the dangers of mistranslation, appropriation and commodification.'¹²⁶

Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney from the Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri nations, writes of the racialised frameworks researchers have inherited:

¹²³ Uncle Stephen Goldsmith, interview with author, January 2016 (permission to quote given by Jamie Goldsmith, 2019).

¹²⁴ Kwaymullina, *AlterNative*, 437.

¹²⁵ Kwaymullina, *AlterNative*, 440-442.

¹²⁶ Kwaymullina, *AlterNative*, 441.

The encounters between Western science and Indigenous Australians in the early phases of colonisation reveal the perpetuation of Western science as the teller of 'truth'... It is the racialised research structures, philosophies and methods of investigation that we have inherited from colonialism ... that have been fundamental in ... oppression...¹²⁷

Professor Dennis Foley of the Gai-marigal nation describes:

The neo-colonial dominance of research that historically has been based on the researcher dominating the 'subject' and enjoying the benefits of the research...Indigenous peoples still share a base experience of subjugation.¹²⁸

In terms of research theory, Foley goes on to cite that 'Western discourse has already been identified as discriminatory, Anglo-European determined and ideologically controlled.'¹²⁹

To close this survey of some Indigenous scholars, I return to Professor Tuhiwai Smith: 'the word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary'.¹³⁰

It becomes overwhelmingly apparent that Aboriginal scholarship such as that quoted above requires serious consideration of these issues, historical and contemporary, and demands more accountable and rigorous processes moving forward. It is particularly important to

¹²⁷ Lester Rigney, *A first perspective of Indigenous Australian participation in science: Framing Indigenous research towards Indigenous Australian intellectual sovereignty*, Keynote Address to the Second National Indigenous Researchers Forum (Aboriginal Research Institute, University of South Australia, 2001), 3-4.

¹²⁸ Dennis Foley, "Indigenous Epistemology and Indigenous Standpoint Theory" in *Social Alternatives* vol 22, no. 1 (Summer 2003), 45-49.

¹²⁹ John Ogbor, 'Mythicizing and Reification in Entrepreneurial Discourse: Ideology-critique of Entrepreneurial Studies' in *Journal of Management Studies*, 37 (5), 3-12, cited in Foley, *Social Alternatives Vol 22 No 1*.

¹³⁰ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 22.

ensure that the process of listening is embedded in methodology and that participant control over resulting data is guaranteed. These areas became the goals emerging from this review of Aboriginal authorship and are discussed in the ethics section.

Finally, Rigney writes, 'It is culturally appropriate that Indigenous Australians speak through Indigenous researchers.'¹³¹ This is something to be underlined as a foundational issue. To reiterate, this project did not seek to speak for, or explain, any information generously shared by Aboriginal communities. The author intended purely to make the connections discussed in the Introduction Chapter, and learn from participants; not appropriate or present. The intention was to find a way for white people to receive wisdom and learn, and the project was written as such. The project continues to stand with Aboriginal colleagues in support of academic self-determination and ownership of Indigenous knowledge, and I welcome all correction from Indigenous scholars.

Origins of the methodology

Because this research studies a particular community of whom the researcher is not a member – Aboriginal people who are followers of Jesus – its methodology is essentially ethnography. In ethnographic work a researcher immerses themselves in and studies a culture or social setting by way of observation of participants, interviews, observation of interaction between participants, and extended periods of exposure to the community

¹³¹ Lester Rigney, "Internalisation of an Indigenous anti-colonial cultural critique of research methodologies: a guide to Indigenous research methodologies and its principles", *Journal of American Studies*, 14, no.2 (1997), 109-122.

being researched.¹³² In its most condensed definition, ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture.¹³³

Emerging from the roots of social anthropology and believed to have been defined by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1922, traditional approaches to ethnography centred on detached observation, but impartiality was an issue impacting on an aimed-for 'objectivity' from ethnography's beginnings. Subsequent generations of researchers argued that the position of privilege from which Malinowski first developed ethnographic research was eroding, and that impartiality was untenable. As researchers, their exploration caused them to experience personal response. In addition, their findings were eliciting different perspectives as new audiences reread and reinterpreted their findings.

A contemporary perspective of ethnography is that it no longer seeks to reveal one truth, but seeks to describe a cultural climate from many different perspectives.¹³⁴ This is an approach aptly describing the dynamic which would eventuate between myself and the participants in this study – a description of encounters with Jesus through tradition and experience, not one single-faceted entity but a revelation of the Spirit viewed differently depending on the storyteller's lens:

¹³² Alan Bryman, *Social research methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 336-337.

¹³³ David Fetterman, "Ethnography" in *Handbook of applied social research methods* eds. Leonard Bickman and Debra Rog (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 473-504.

¹³⁴ Shafik Dharamsi and Grant Charles, "*Ethnography: traditional and criticalist conceptions of a qualitative research method*", *Canadian Family Physician* 57, no.3 (March 2011), 378-379.

(Ethnographic methods) involve studying people within their own cultural environment through intensive fieldwork; they emphasize the subjects' frames of reference and understandings of the world.¹³⁵

It is the subjects' frames of reference that were prioritised through this project. Because this research is concerned with people's God-stories, and how their understandings of Christology are expressed, ethnography here meets theology. In connecting with people, listening to them, and pondering my own perspective on the subject, however, it was impossible for me – a researcher invested in God-stories myself – to operate impartially. The reflexive dimension was therefore included.

Reflexive ethnography

Reflexive ethnography, a methodology that incorporates the researcher's personal response to the material collected, was defined in the mid-1990s by Cuban anthropologist Ruth Behar as 'vulnerable writing'.¹³⁶ To Behar, separating a human, emotional response to participants' stories from clinical analysis detracts from the breadth of the material. It prohibits its use as a tool to profoundly change both the researcher and the final thesis, which should foster a similar response of empathy among its audience.

Behar acknowledges that researchers take 'baggage' on their journey, and argued for examination of how issues raised during research affect the researcher, not just the

¹³⁵Jane Singer, "Ethnography," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2009), 191.

¹³⁶ Ruth Behar, *The vulnerable observer: anthropology that breaks your heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 15.

researched.¹³⁷ Drawing connections between the researcher's experience and the studied subject allows the researcher's filters to be scrutinised for the subjective.

Behar called for an intellectual and emotional response from the listener. The material must be presented professionally – free from long-winded presentation clouded with tears or shouting – but she models a methodology that allows for the researcher to record the reflexive process for the good of the project and its audience in terms of seeing the factual material but also acknowledging how this changes the human recipient and resultant audiences.¹³⁸

Behar wrote of herself as 'an anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others.'¹³⁹ This is a fitting statement for not only a personal research project as this thesis proved to be, but also for a project that seeks to challenge how its church knows itself and knows others. A commitment to bringing the words of the Papal address to life in my own parish is well-served by a methodology that allows internal change on the part of all involved, including the intended audience of non-Aboriginal Catholics. This change will then hopefully be the forerunner of wider inclusion and listening.

Mexican academic Professor Gunther Dietz has written of other features of reflexive ethnography that serve this project. One is a necessary experience for the colonising

¹³⁷ Behar, *The vulnerable observer*, 8.

¹³⁸ Behar, *The vulnerable observer*, 5-13.

¹³⁹ Behar, *The vulnerable observer*, 33.

community; that of empathising with the indigenous community and responding to the impact shared history has had. Dietz also describes how reflexive ethnography, with its incorporation of self-criticism, breaks down social and power structures that can otherwise impact on the dynamic of the ethnography.¹⁴⁰ The social and power structures that mark almost every Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal interaction on this continent can thus be challenged by the introspective examination inherent in reflexive ethnography. Behar discusses 'negotiation of entry' to research and personal connections to the researched community.¹⁴¹ I adopted these points from Behar, illustrated in the question outline later, and my responses to these, as respectful to the communities, the content, and my learning experience.

The methodology for this project, developed as a reflexive ethnography focussing on the Christ stories of the dingo songline, allowed for listening to God-stories, responding to these through a personal lens and monitoring their effect on me and my personal inculturations of Christ. This method facilitated the identification of aspects of Aboriginal Christologies that reconcile the aims of the Papal Address with current recognition of Jesus across Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and differing perspectives within.

Canadian academics, Drs Vandenberg and Hall, explain how 'greater attention to reflexivity, relationality and reciprocity [when doing ethnography] could reduce opportunities for

¹⁴⁰ Gunther Dietz, "Towards a doubly reflexive ethnography: a proposal from the anthropology of interculturality," in *Revista de Antropologia* vol 6, no. 1 (2011), 11-20.

¹⁴¹ Behar, *The vulnerable observer*, 15-16.

researcher bias and the potential for oppressive structures and dominant power relations to be reinforced.’¹⁴²

Australian academic Dr Gabrielle Russell-Mundine notes that ‘reflexivity will only lead to reforming and decolonising research if it also addresses deeper issues such as interrogating the systems of the dominant White culture.’¹⁴³

It is an attempt to implement Vandenberg and Hall’s relationality that gives rise to the next section, which discusses Aboriginal attitudes to these power relations using the view of Aboriginal academics on data collection among their own communities by non-Aboriginal researchers. These perspectives were of paramount importance when affirming a method aligned with the project’s commitment to privileging Aboriginal voices.

Aboriginal reference group

To stay accountable to this commitment, I relied on my Aboriginal Reference Group to advise and critique. Of those physically nearby, some were colleagues, and weekly meetings about cultural content of the research were held face-to-face. Another face-to-face opportunity occurred at my weekly Kurna language lesson, when members would answer questions for me. Other members reviewed chapters as they were drafted, providing

¹⁴² Helen Vandenberg and Wendy Hall, “Critical ethnography: extending attention to bias and reinforcement of dominant power relations” in *Nurse Researcher*, vol 18, no. 3 (2011).

¹⁴³ Gabrielle Russell-Mundine, “Reflexivity in Indigenous research: reframing and decolonising research?” in *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, vol 19, no. 1 (2012).

feedback on these as a whole. Other members commented on chapters as a whole but also responded informally to text messages, messenger messages and email.

This group provided feedback on my text from paragraphs to whole chapters. They clarified concepts I was not sure about and advised on terminology, protocols and community perspective. The group was also able to teach me concepts associated with the dingo songline and kinship, crucial to this research. Members of the group explained the damage inflicted by missionary activity, and suggested strategies to employ during interview to promote participant comfort. Two members were particularly helpful in assisting with spelling and translating language words. When critiquing chapters, the group pointed out phraseology or approaches that may be interpreted as paternalistic or patronising, as well as concepts that were incorrectly-expressed or not representative of broad Aboriginal experiences.

Having the errors of the text identified and explained by an Aboriginal audience lent me confidence that the result stayed as true as possible to the aim of fair, valid representation and collaboration.

[Methods: data collection](#)

Data collection took place over 2017-2019 along the dingo songline, and twelve participants were involved (participant breakdown provided below). Participants were drawn from the Adnyamathanha, Arrernte, Bundjalung, Dhuwal, Kurna, Kokatha, Narrunga, Ngan'gikurrunggurr, Ngarrindjeri, Pintupi-Loritja, and Wirangu-Mirning nations.

Semi-structured interviews took place at an Aboriginal vocational college, an art studio, a parish office, presbyteries, a playground, private homes including my own, a bush retreat, a pub, a school, and several kilometres from Alice Springs in the bush, on women's country. Participants thus determined locations of personal comfort to them. This also accommodated the transient nature of many busy teaching, family, and cultural demands of participants.

The approach of semi-structured interviews was designed, within a basic frame, to allow for inclusion of genuine, comprehensive representation of participant opinion and exploration of incidental tangents relevant to the research question. It also allowed for a similar overall direction for the interviews, allowing stories and themes to unfold even though participants may live far away from each other on the dingo songline; indeed, on the other end of the continent.

In semi-structured interviewing, what is crucial is that the questioning allows interviewers to glean research participants' perspectives on their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interviews.¹⁴⁴

Interview was important as Aboriginal nations are largely an oral culture, and little is written in the area I wished to explore to add to the current understanding of my church community. Online or phone interview options were rejected, as examination of the participant and their sphere indicated that personal relationships were required as a matter of cultural respect and personal comfort when sharing personal and cultural data.

¹⁴⁴ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 372.

Data collection took a different amount of time from that outlined in the university PhD calendar due to the nature of subjects. In line with the principles informing my work discussed above, it was necessary to establish personal connections with people and communities as a matter of respect before commencing formal data collection. This was an extremely valuable investment of time as it produced more genuine and comprehensive data and contributed to my personal academic and non-academic growth.

The interview style, following a structure in participants' nominated settings, drew on the Aboriginal concept of 'yarning.' Yarning is often seen superficially by the non-Aboriginal community as a synonym for 'chatting'. Australian researchers Leeson, Smith and Rynne explain that its qualities are more profound:

(Yarning) allows for the collection of data in a culturally safe and appropriate way while simultaneously framing the research within a paradigm accepted by Western scholarship.¹⁴⁵

Aboriginal education lecturer Cheree Dean affirms yarning as an appropriate way to position all participants in the process.

The utilisation of 'yarning' as a data collection tool constitutes a means through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontology, epistemology and axiology can be prioritised in the completion of research. Yarning 'reflects a formal process of sharing knowledge that is reliant upon relationships, expected outcomes, responsibility and accountability between the participants, country and culture.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Leeson et al, "Yarning and appreciative inquiry".

¹⁴⁶Cheree Dean, "A yarning place in narrative histories" in *History of Education Review* vol 39, no. 2 (2010), 6–13.

Yarning created an arena that allowed participants to voice knowledge and contribute to research in 'culturally appropriate ways'.¹⁴⁷ This context, primarily concerned with the framing and generation of research, provides ownership of the process to Aboriginal participants, and power over what information is ultimately divulged.¹⁴⁸ The conversational process of yarning therefore brings culture and ownership to an interview that prioritises country, interpersonal and ancestral relationships, in 'a bid to cultivate respect in the transmission and acceptance of knowledge.'¹⁴⁹

Matthew Kauschke, a Pintupi man who works within the South Australian Aboriginal Workforces Initiative Team, articulates core values and underpinning principles of yarning circles.¹⁵⁰ Particularly relevant to a non-Aboriginal researcher is the enquiry- and dialogue-based approach rather than a solution-focussed, conflict resolution outcome. This removes unconscious attempts to guide dialogue and places the focus on common ground. The structure includes participants to speak from their strengths, which infers that I examine my areas of weakness and be conscious of my position as humble, inexperienced and unknowledgeable in the areas in which I was learning.

The freedom, afforded by yarning principles, to explore incidental comments and respond to participants flexibly with pertinent questions ensured a more valid representation of community worldview and theological and social conditions. Questions were non-leading and largely open-ended. They were also open to paraphrasing by me to allow clarity of

¹⁴⁷ Dean, *A yarning place*, 6-13.

¹⁴⁸ Dean, *A yarning place*, 6-13.

¹⁴⁹ Leeson et al, "Yarning and appreciative inquiry".

¹⁵⁰ Matthew Kauschke, *Aboriginal workforce plan stage 2 consultation group yarning circles: participants' guide* (Adelaide: Department for Education, 2020).

discourse between me, limited to English, and those interviewees who were speaking English as a second, third or fourth language. Initial questions allowed a basic assessment of suitable vocabulary on my part.

Because the interviewing process was highly contextualised; urban, multilingual, remote, fundamentalist, cultural, etc, I sometimes adjusted my questions, as discussed in terms of asking appropriate questions that fit the interviewees' comfort and cultural parameters. To ensure validity and consistency of data collection, I examined transcripts, at the conclusion of each interview to ensure I continued to improve my approach and keep data collection of maximum quality. I assessed issues like: which questions I skipped and why; which questions participants struggled to answer; which areas were raised outside of the interview questions; where closed questions were introduced; where wait time was insufficient; where participants were interpreting the question in unexpected ways; and where tangential questions were appropriate or not sufficiently informed. This allowed me to look for patterns in my own application of the method and adapt accordingly. This process allowed the quality of interviews to be enhanced as the data collection period progressed and kept me accountable to both my method and the comprehensiveness of questions.

Steinar Kvale was a Norwegian psychologist specialising in qualitative interviewing. His list of ten criteria of a successful interviewer was utilised during interviews to show reception and respect: knowledgeable, structuring, clear, gentle, sensitive, steering, open, critical, remembering, and interpreting.¹⁵¹ While this is a generic list, the qualities are particularly

¹⁵¹ Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing* (California: Sage, 1996), 148-149.

relevant in a dynamic where colonial issues, as discussed above, may provoke discomfort or shyness. One subgroup had been conditioned to show deference to any white person, and this list was useful to encourage free conversation, moving away from terms such as 'Whatever you think' or addressing me as 'boss'. Remaining sensitive to the history of this language, and honouring freedom of language choices, the interpreting factor allowed me to attempt analysis of the reason for the signs of deferential attitude, while the steering factor allowed me to invite alternative names and elicit opinion while staying focussed on the topic.

Also important to this form of theological research is the language of the questions: it *must not be intimidating*, it must not have imperialistic, narcissistic, racist, classist overtones that serve to subjugate the respondents. The questions have to be discerned carefully to ensure these elements are not present. Sometimes these attitudes exist in the investigator on a subconscious level, which is why self-reflexivity is an important part of the researcher's praxis.¹⁵²

Dr Vicki Grieves, of the Warraimay nation, writes that 'It is impossible to really know any culture except from the inside.'¹⁵³

Questions to probe paths opened by participants were sought in preference to behaviours that may resonate with colonial proclivities described by the Indigenous scholars above.

One crucial factor was allowing for processing time by the participant and resulted in much more data than attempts without it. These attempts resulted in far less material. One or two sentences might emerge, and the interview would rush on. However, I learned that if I was

¹⁵² Skye, *Yiminga calling*, 102.

¹⁵³ Vicki Grieves, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal philosophy, the basis of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing, discussion paper No. 9* (Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health: Darwin, 2009), 40.

quiet long enough, and sought non-verbal cues to indicate that the speaker had finished, I would receive a lot more information. This was a significant challenge for my personality type; the Kurna name given to me by my language teachers is *Warrapina*: 'loves to talk.'

As the Kurna Higher Education Centre advises, 'Sufficient time should be allowed for the participants to absorb and respond to the information presented.'¹⁵⁴

Theological academics Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen explored theologically-reimagined research practices, seeking to develop interview strategies beyond social science models to methods that acknowledge God's presence in the interview space. They identify silence as a key strategy, writing, 'The practice of keeping silence is a key feature of working in a circle of trust.'¹⁵⁵ Silence not only allows time for the interviewee to speak, but for these researchers, looking at qualitative methods in theological ethnography, it reflects the silent presence of God and peace as we are held in God's grounding, silent presence. Their research had an impact on my method, as all participants, including myself, are Christian, and connected to the power of silence and reflection at the appropriate times.

Participants responded to conversational prompts during interview. These prompts, while formulated from my research question, were critiqued by the Aboriginal Reference Group. They continued to be modified by Aboriginal participants in different communities, which ensured cultural integrity and data collection underpinned by consultation and validation.

¹⁵⁴ Kurna Higher Education Centre: Aboriginal Research Institute, *Ethics in Aboriginal Research* (University of South Australia: South Australia, 1993).

¹⁵⁵ Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, "Ethnography on holy ground: how qualitative interviewing is practical theological work" in *International journal of practical theology*, vol 17 no. 2 (2013), 247.

...the women often state their theology/spirituality broadly, covering several Christian theological areas in one statement or story. Thus, further laborious discernment was required in order to place their views appropriately in the correct theological areas. Often the meaning was inferred and perhaps displayed with hand gestures or drawings in the dirt or sand, and I would have to exercise an intuitive response, expressing its meaning in my own words, then gaining verification of my interpretation from the participants.¹⁵⁶

Some participants were subsequently in touch up to four times beyond the interview.

Examples included adjustments to inferential language, provision of historical and community context, insertion of local language, movement and continuation of the interview to a significant physical place, movement of the interview to a place where the participant felt safe, and invitation by the interviewee to other community members to consult on points of fact or theology. These adjustments maintained the commitment to context and reflection discussed above. They also ensured that conditions were in place to generate valid and reliable data.

The conversational prompts were also tailored towards production of nation-specific responses, to avoid dangers associated with researcher positionality with regard to black people. These dangers are articulated by black educational professor H. Richard Milner, who uses critical race theory and examples of race- and culture-blind research to warn against homogenous practices that fail to hear the narrative from the knowers and are not culturally-introspective enough to engage in authentic learning.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Skye, *Yiminga calling*, 136-137.

¹⁵⁷ H. Richard Milner, "Race, culture, and researcher positionality: working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen" in *Educational Researcher*, vol 36, no. 7 (2015).

Questions

The following question frame was common across interviews conducted along the dingo storyline. Terminology changed according to nation, however. The example given here was asked of participants from the Arrernte community. The questions are non-exhaustive, because to avoid dominating the conversation, and to honour active listening, I usually responded to previous answers and followed the speaker along tangents arising from these.

Do you identify with a Christian denomination?

How do you see Jesus actively in your life/community?

Do you feel Jesus is located within any Arrernte stories (maybe under another name or as an animal-sparrow?)?

Where do you perceive Jesus to be located in Country, if at all?

How long do you feel Jesus has been here?

How do you see Jesus in relation to Altyerre? (formerly Dreaming)

Some people place Jesus as an ancestral being. Do you see Jesus as different from, the same as, or aligned with ancestral beings; or something else?

What are your thoughts on ancestral beings and hypostatic union? (only for those trained in Western religion)

Where is Jesus on Country?

How would you describe the relationship between Ngkarte and Ngkarte Kweke? (God and little God/Jesus)

These questions had vocabulary adjusted to allow for participants who spoke several languages, those who were elderly and had partial hearing, those who were trained in theology and had an extensive vocabulary, or for those with limited formal education in both Western and Aboriginal senses (as a result of enforced governmental institutionalisation). All theological meanings remained the same; for example, the word 'perceive' was replaced by 'see' or similar in the field.

Further differentiation included the speed with which questions were asked, and the inclusion of a chaperone where necessary for cultural or comfort reasons.

As already noted, when working across nations on the dingo songline, language in the question frame was adjusted to meet local contexts. For example, the words for Father/God, Son/Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Jesus and Mary were all changed to words in the local language (with the assistance of local friends or religious). The questions were designed to come from a local background context, such as asking questions about country and story rather than church. To avoid intimidating people into feeling obliged to commit a great deal

of time the list was deliberately brief. As it eventuated, these questions were sufficient to generate upwards of two hours' conversation about Jesus. All were designed to avoid imposition of colonial doctrine, and were framed based on what participants feel, see, or think in relation to ideas lifted from the literature in my review as well as local friends and religious.

Participants' Profiles

As discussed in the Introduction, participants were drawn from nations associated with the dingo songline because these nations are linked through shared geography, story, and song. Similarities in these things exist among nations on the songline, and given the vast diversity of Aboriginal nations, it made the research process concise to contain data collection to this area. It was a further practicality to begin research on Kurna country, near one end of the dingo songline, on which I live and work, and am writing this thesis.

The method of sampling I used was maximum variation sampling, a form of purposive sampling that allowed me to target individuals best placed to answer my research question across as wide a representation of communities as possible. I was able to target people from communities whom I already knew, with whom I had shared conversations on this topic and who expressed interest in speaking.

I also had several interested parties from church communities offer to introduce me to potential interviewees. This resulted in participation from communities to which I had no previous exposure and enriched the diversity of the sample. These interested parties, often

local religious, also served as useful intermediaries. With their knowledge of local people, they could approach appropriate parties and act as protection from the risk of people feeling pressured by myself, a stranger, approaching them. They also helped provide places where people felt safe and comfortable to talk, and their pastoral care ensured I could facilitate the interviews with due acquiescence to ethics conditions, primarily the wellbeing of participants. The collection process was facilitated in large part by these interested community members. This resulted in a sample diverse in sex, age, denomination, status, language group, and other factors such as mission background, fundamentalism that rejects aspects of culture, progressive Christians, and so on.

Some of the participants were closely linked with pre-invasion cultures, while others had varying degrees of engagement with pre-invasion cultures. All participants were drawn from Aboriginal communities with blends of pre- and post-invasion Aboriginal cultures. Members of the Aboriginal Reference Group were clear in stating that culture transcends pre-invasion cultures alone. While these underpin Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal cultures with less obvious elements of pre-invasion aspects (usually due to colonisation or subsequent brutalities such as the Stolen Generation) are no less valid than cultures that were able to maintain stronger links with pre-invasion culture.

The participant pool finished at twelve for many reasons. The primary reason is that the Aboriginal population of Australia is very small, and the Aboriginal Christian population even smaller. Many Aboriginal peoples have turned away from the Churches that facilitated child theft, rape and cultural genocide (see Chapter Four). Many communities are revitalising their connection with their own expressions of spirituality. In addition to the small

demographic, many people are reluctant to speak to non-Aboriginal interviewers due to factors such as historical abuse of shared material, risks of interview, intergenerational trauma, or culturally-unsafe practices by the interviewer. I was very fortunate with the people who agreed to work with me, as many are representatives of their community. People within their towns and parishes selected them to speak for the wider group, and the participants included church leaders, preachers, biblical scholars, teachers, healers, and wise people. This specialist cohort was uniquely equipped to speak from a wealth of knowledge and experience. While the participant data in the thesis is comprehensive, it is a sample, and as discussed earlier, not representative of all Aboriginal viewpoints.

The profiles are presented in two categories: those who wished to be identified; and those who wished to remain anonymous.

Anonymous Participants

Participant A is a Kokotha woman. She was raised in an urban Lutheran community with links to the mission at Koonibba.

Participant B is a Yolngu Dhuwal-speaking woman from Yirrkala in Arnhem Land. She worships in a community called Yolngu for Jesus, a charismatic movement that emerged from the Baptist church.

Participant C is a parolee who says he really became a Christian while incarcerated, although he had been raised as a Lutheran. He is a Wirangu-Mirning man who belongs to a charismatic community derived from the Baptist church.

Participant D is an Arrernte-speaking woman who identifies with the Catholic tradition, and also lives a lifestyle imbued with pre-invasion Arrernte culture and spiritual beliefs. After interview, she decided to allow only anonymous comments in certain areas, rather than direct quotes.

P is a multilingual, initiated community leader of the Pintupi-Luritja and Bundjalung nations. He identifies as a follower of Jesus rather than with any particular denomination.

Identifiable Participants

Mia is an Arrernte-speaking woman living a path of Catholic and pre-invasion cultural beliefs. She is a healer in her community at Ltyentye Apurte in the Northern Territory.

Claire is an Arrernte-speaking woman at Ltyentye Apurte, living Catholic and pre-invasion Arrernte belief systems largely through her art.

Mrs. Ryder is an Arrernte-speaking woman practising Arrernte and Catholic traditions in Alice Springs. She is involved in Arrernte translations in liturgies.

Emma is a youth leader in her Berean church that broke off from the Baptist tradition. She is a multilingual Adnyamathanha woman.

Emori is a multilingual Adnyamathanha man who is also a member of the Berean church. He is training to become a musical leader in the church.

Troy is a young multilingual artist from Wadeye in the Northern Territory. He lives the traditions of both Catholicism and his Ngan'gikurrunggurr nation.

Rhanee is an Adnyamathanha woman, and a published author and artist who works for the Uniting Church.

Respondent validation: some participants did not wish to view their transcripts on completion but gave verbal consent for their use. Of those who did, one decided to withdraw participation, stating that the material was too culturally sensitive for her to feel comfortable seeing published.

Some practicalities of the project with which I close this section occurred in rural Northern Territory. On one occasion, I was chatting with a young man about his home. A nearby non-Aboriginal man asked a question about men's business in the middle of the conversation. I immediately got up and left the campfire. The next day, I was approached by this young man who had been annoyed at the question and hadn't answered it, but said the fact that I was sensitive to the fact I shouldn't hear this information meant he was now willing to be interviewed.

On another occasion, I was meeting someone at the local pub for a chat. I did not know that the pub's patrons practiced informal segregation. When I was told I was in the "Aboriginal side" and invited to move, I stayed where I was. The people who met and spoke with me after this mentioned that this small action was meaningful to them and a good representation of what reconciliation could look like. This was a very humbling thing to a privileged white woman who had only thought dismissively of a silly unspoken rule, rather than the far-reaching implications on the lives of others that such a rule represented.

I include these anecdotes as testimony to the power of respect and acknowledgement of culture – and putting ourselves in another box – in building respectful dialogues in research. It illustrates the value of relationship built through the respectful contextualisation discussed in relation to the interview questions above, and personal interaction. The benefit is not just research data, but mutual warmth experienced by people embracing cultural acceptance and eventually friendship.

Limitations

Several well-intentioned people facilitated meetings with interviewees, but ultimately did a lot of speaking for them. This frustrated the amount of data that was able to be gathered and compromised authenticity and the principle of privileging Aboriginal voices as a listening project. Associated with this was the amount of time set aside to talk. In especially rural conditions, an hour was not long enough to dig deeper and explore answers. Sometimes time extensions were possible at interviewees' invitation, but often data was

being collected in a remote community and the researcher was under time restrictions to return to town before nightfall (non-residents are highly discouraged from driving on outback roads after dark). A future restructuring of interview conditions, informed by this project, would be recommended.

An interview condition that was problematic was that *ad hoc* invitations could not always be accommodated. As people got to know me and the response rate accelerated, invitations to visit camps or other communities were often issued on the spur of the moment, in line with the hospitality of these communities. However strict schedules made this impossible a lot of the time. It was a trying reality that as my research period closed, I met at least five women who were interested in providing data. One woman asked as I was literally leaving for a plane. Unfortunately, the time limit of the course, in addition to financial restraints, prevented me from responding to these invitations, which was frustrating in the extreme.

In contrast, I had several people approach me offering to talk after the data collection period was over; another example of differing senses of urgency.

One main limitation discussed already was the relatively short time frame allowed for data collection. Working in these communities required the establishment of relationships, which began flourishing just as my research period was drawing to a close. This project would have included more comprehensive data had I more time.

This highlighted the fact that there is a lot more information available to non-Aboriginal people, but significant time must be invested into establishing relationships before these

offers are generated. As I write this today, I was approached by a gentleman asking me if I would like to meet some people interested in speaking. This affirmed my belief in the fact that many people in the Aboriginal community want to share; we have only to pause, listen, and truly hear.

Interviews, and potential data were also lost when people needed to travel for work, ceremony, family reasons, or other commitments, as this was sometimes at the last minute. On other occasions, interviewees spoke with me, but upon reading their transcript, decided the data was too personal, revealed too much culture, or was not translating well to written text.

Impacting on interviewing method was the Arrernte community who took me out on women's country and taught me the best and most respectful ways to receive wisdom. This included physically creating a circular space, burning the proper leaves, being quiet, waiting, listening to Country, and waiting for a sign from nature. Some of these methods were applied on subsequent visits to their community.

Methods: data analysis

Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate way of approaching data in that it was apparent early in the project that it would generate several primary and secondary themes. It also sits within reflexive ethnography, allowing data to be analysed without the requirement of fulfilling predesigned criteria.

North American academics Dr Greg Guest, Dr Kathleen MacQueen, and Emily Namey are experts in qualitative research methods and data analysis. Their approach to analysing data collected inductively, and representing personal experience and narrative, fits with the material I was seeking to analyse and categorise.

The (thematic analysis) approach is a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible...in the end, its primary concern is with presenting the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible.¹⁵⁸

The data collection process itself is less structured, more flexible, and inductive.... Exclusion of specific data collection or analysis methods from the definition also paves the way for a more refined view of qualitative data analysis, one that distinguishes between the data themselves and the analyses performed on data.¹⁵⁹

Thematic analysis was also an appropriate fit as the interview method employed was recursive both in revisiting material during interviews and revisiting participants at later dates to have discussions raised by them about our interview. Analysis of data and clarification from participants was ongoing and synergetic. Ultimately data was categorised into major themes that emerged implicitly and explicitly, as discussed in the upcoming discussion chapters.

Thematic analyses...require more involvement and interpretation from the researcher (than word-based techniques). Thematic analyses ... focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data ...We feel that a thematic analysis is still the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Guest et al, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 13-14.

¹⁵⁹ Guest et al, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 4.

¹⁶⁰ Guest et al, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 9.

After segmenting raw data to map responses, the map was used to create themes.¹⁶¹ These themes were used to code the data using code-by-characteristic matrices. Code frequencies, or the number of times particular codes appeared in the data, were reviewed to ensure participants were responding to the same questions (in intention; as discussed, the questions were not always verbatim to accommodate local contexts).

After this, a gap analysis of the data was conducted to examine the inferred presence of Jesus where participants mentioned the words 'Trinity' or 'three-in-one' or another clearly-implied reference to the Trinity (by response or in context).

When coding, there were many possible categories that related to the research question, but data was coded into the following categories and subcategories:

¹⁶¹ Guest et al, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 90.

Common areas of belief

- Presence of the spirit of Jesus since Creation
- Jesus is distinct from other spiritual beings in respective traditions
- Common roles of Jesus
 - 1) Messenger
 - 2) Healer
 - 3) Support/strength/love
 - 4) Giver of life
 - 5) Stranger
 - 6) Giver of the law/teacher

Theoretical saturation was reached when it was apparent towards the end of data collection that no new data falling into the above broad categories was presenting.

There was a wealth of data within each community's knowledge which would potentially provide a significantly larger body of material to support these categories, however the limitations discussed further below prevented its collection. In addition, an intent of this project was to gather data broadly across communities; in-depth investigation of the categories emerging would be a worthy future research focus. It is important to note that this theoretical saturation is subject to this disclaimer. Theoretical saturation was reached, but the content within each is far from exhaustive.

Ethics approval

Flinders University, like many universities, requires strict ethics rules to be followed when undertaking a research project, and there are in addition extraordinary rules for working with Aboriginal peoples. This safeguarded the legal, intellectual and emotional wellbeing of participants, while allowing me to develop approaches within this ethics framework that recognised and respected individual community dimensions when listening and recording.

When working with participants from Aboriginal communities, the incorporation of several factors was required to honour participants' stories, be sensitive to the history of the communities involved (including the researcher), establish an appropriate humble observatory and learning role for the researcher, and to privilege Aboriginal voices and experiences.

Seeking to be humbly mindful of the communities' experience and survival living in a way mindful of Aboriginal commentary on white research, and mandated by the respect and commitment to listening and learning described earlier, I approached this in the following seven ways.

Firstly, information for participants made explicit that they only needed to respond to questions they wished to, and they had complete ownership and autonomy over their words. Not only were they able to author questions, withdraw or modify at any time, they were also free to access the data throughout the drafting period to ensure they were happy with interpretation.

In addition to the interview principles described in the section above, conscious attempts to decolonise the process were made to present as a student, receiving valued wisdom humbly. This was attained by lower physical placement to the speaker, active listening, and respectful word choice, including the appropriate local word for authority or Elder. Being mindful that invasion has impacted every facet of participants' lives, down to the poverty many still endure today, required diplomatic interaction and specific efforts to acknowledge land and theological ownership.

Thirdly, gravitas was required when discussing spiritual issues, and a preparedness to speak little other than the questions. Conversational priority was always offered to participants, and stillness when listening indicated respect and acknowledgement of the authority and owner of wisdom in the space. The interviews were a time of gratitude and serious sharing of foundational spirituality, not flippancy. The information was being given freely to a privileged woman with no real concept of the community's griefs and faith.

Fourthly, I analysed my language for references such as 'His Holiness' and 'Our Lady' and made notes to use less denominational language. Listening to people talking required my suspension of my personal relationship with Catholic doctrine, and honour as legitimate concepts which were new and challenging to me. This is a process in which I am still involved.

A fifth approach was that Tuhiwai Smith's perspective on Imperialism, and the reviewed Aboriginal academics' conceptualisation of non-colonial practices, was implemented

through consultation with the Aboriginal Reference Group, consultation with third parties who knew the community, such as priests, nuns, relatives, or other community members, or through consultation with the participants themselves, whose primary response was to express where they wished to speak. Supporting this was the fact that the process required to gain ethics approval from my university was in part designed to ensure participant autonomy over what nature of question they were willing to answer in their own context. This was in response to community and scholarly concerns over sensitive or plagiarised information published by non-Aboriginal people, or concerns over intimidating, coercive, deceptive or culturally-inappropriate methods being used in data collection.

Sixthly, local language was incorporated, learning a little of each participants' as appropriate. Chaperones were utilised where requested, and participants met outside, on women's country, in playgrounds, and in classrooms. Pains were taken to respect each individual nation as distinct, acknowledging diversity of language, country, story, and other aspects of nations appropriate for an outside researcher to know. Opinions that were completely counter to the dominant culture norm helped track and challenge the bias of the researcher, particularly inculturations of Jesus and concepts that sit outside the Catholic tradition, such as incarnation of Jesus or Mary as an Aboriginal cultural woman.¹⁶²

¹⁶² I distinguish between 'incarnation' and 'inculturation'. It may appear that to incarnate into a culture, inculturation is automatic. However as will be seen, this is not a view shared by all Aboriginal people. For the purposes of this project, I define 'incarnation' as a deity unconditionally becoming flesh, or becoming flesh with the properties recognised by the western church, and 'inculturation' as that deity, whether in flesh or spiritual form, assuming markers of a distinctive culture, such as a language name or participation in Aboriginal ceremony. This will be explored later in the thesis.

Constant critical analysis of my privilege by myself and my Aboriginal Reference Group, along with bias and perspective, were necessary for a faithful interview experience, to collect data authentically, to focus on the relevant, to discard conditioning that was not faithful to respectful discourse:

Settlers' ...linguistic and cultural homeland is somewhere else, their cultural loyalty is to some other place. Their power, their privilege, their history are all vested in their legacy as colonisers.¹⁶³

To recognise this in the method, the interview questions and location were contextualised. Aspects of my Irish culture were shared and local details about country sourced, being mindful that the researcher was an international foreigner (viewed through the Aboriginal perspective that Australia is not one country but many nations on one continent).

Kwaymullina writes:

...Eurocentric scholars did not articulate the limitations or subjectivities of their position; it was presumed that they spoke from an inherently superior, objective (neutral) position... non-Indigenous scholars who research Indigenous peoples do so from the fraught position of holding a privilege that emerged from – and to some degree is sustained by – the marginalisation of the people they write about.¹⁶⁴

Having worked for many years in Aboriginal communities, I was very conscious that I have benefitted from opportunities and prospered at the expense of Aboriginal peoples, particularly the Kurna peoples. This is a painful but necessary fact to keep in mind, to stay non-presumptuous, to listen, and to respect parameters placed on interview, as was

¹⁶³ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 7.

¹⁶⁴ Kwaymullina, *AlterNative*, 442.

discussed above. The theft of land and subsequent atrocities perpetrated by non-Aboriginal peoples is not a distant memory, and the legacy continues.

Russell-Mundine writes:

Indigenous researchers continuously challenge the structure of western-based research agendas in order to reframe and decolonise research. Integral to an Indigenous research paradigm is an understanding that researchers bring a particular world-view that is predicated on factors such as their gender, culture and socioeconomic status.¹⁶⁵

Therefore, constant reminder of personal cultural lens was required; privilege, guilt, the legacy of a colonised Irish family (also including dispossession of land, language, song, dance, food, culture), and the challenges of straying from strict Catholic doctrine. With this identified, and at the foremost of researcher position as much as possible, practical ways to implement the method in a less (white) culture-centric ways above were incorporated. In this context, these ways incorporated the following strategies: interviewer response had to be not to exacerbate the damage and pain; choice was offered to participants, including such things as cessation of interview at any time, or counselling if requested; and it was important to be mindful that personal guilt and grief did not lead to over-familiarity, patronisation, or placement of my own ideas in people's expressions.

Tuhiwai Smith stresses the different perspectives that will inevitably impact on research work between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people:

The finer details of how Western scientists might name themselves are irrelevant to indigenous peoples who have experienced unrelenting research of a profoundly

¹⁶⁵ Russell-Mundine, *Reflexivity in Indigenous research*.

exploitative nature. From an indigenous perspective Western research is...research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualisation of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialised forms of language, and structures of power.¹⁶⁶

This was important to the work in challenging interview questions to be diverse enough to meet context, and also in criticising my response to community members who were confrontational at interviewer presence. It necessitated enquiry as to local protocols, and excluded the assumption of power relationships when people entered a space. It required different consideration of temporal responses and the examination of to which part of a question people were responding. Considering these factors contextualised all these responses and allowed the researcher to depersonalise, remember the history of these communities, focus on the data, and above all stay humble and receptive.

A comment relating to the ethics considerations. Much as the process is clearly in place to protect participants and make the process as consultative as possible, the requirement for the completion of paperwork did not meet the needs of those being interviewed. They did not want to read and sign papers, they wanted to ask questions and give verbal consent. It was with extreme difficulty that anyone was persuaded to sign the form saying their transcript had been read, let alone the initial consent form. People were wary of paperwork, and eventually it was felt worse to keep pushing engagement with papers, when people did not wish to look at them. This issue spoke to Kwaymullina, Rigney and Tuhiwai Smith's

¹⁶⁶ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 92.

critique of white assumptions and frameworks. If the project was truly to honour the respect committed to interviewees, the information would be given orally where possible.

Third parties such as religious, in a number of cases, handed transcripts and other documents back to interviewees. Associated with this was the different values around timeframes. It took several months to receive some documents. Were this project to be repeated, this different perspective on deadlines would be factored in, and the required paperwork renegotiated, so that participants could be offered a fully autonomous, culturally appropriate way for engaging in the process.

Finally, there is in research as well as Christianity an invitation to move forward together in the acknowledgement of Professor Kwaymullina:

It is of vital importance to understand the past and ongoing influence of Eurocentrism-as connected with, and sustained by, white privilege-on the knowledge disciplines and institutions of the west. But it is also important to acknowledge the significant work being done in pursuit of decolonisation by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, and the opportunity for the Creation of new knowledges that now arise from respectful interactions with Indigenous peoples...

There is an ever-increasing body of scholarship emerging out of equitable partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples...¹⁶⁷

It now behoves non-Aboriginal people like me to find respectful ways of forming and sustaining these partnerships.

¹⁶⁷ Kwaymullina, *AlterNative*, 440-1.

In Chapters Five to Nine, research results will be presented and categorised into the themes described above, with a discussion of the implications to follow. Firstly, a brief picture of Catholic Church history in Australia will provide some background for the urgency of my project.

CHAPTER FOUR: A Catholic context

White Australians need to ask themselves, 'How do we become free from our racism?' and 'As Christians, how do we achieve a closer relationship with God?' Answers can only be found through whites' just relationship with the Aboriginal People.¹⁶⁸

Anne Pattel-Gray

Bidjara/Kari Kari theologian

My personal journey

In this chapter I will provide a brief history of my journey on this project, including the Church's relationship to Aboriginal Catholicism to date and the theologians I chose to engage with when attempting observations of Aboriginal Christologies.

Before moving to the theologians with whom I will discuss the material, it is appropriate to look at the Catholic position on Aboriginal peoples, largely in the Kurna Country on which I write. This background forms the context for the radicalisation of social justice movements around Vatican II and the impact of the conciliar documents which resulted in my beginning this project. It also recognises the historical lack of non-Aboriginal interest in Aboriginal spiritual autonomy, including concepts of an Aboriginal-articulated Jesus.

¹⁶⁸ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 205.

I once heard an Aboriginal speaker say that there is no church that Aboriginal people feel safe in.¹⁶⁹ The wretchedness and bitterness I felt and still feel at this statement may be partially illuminated by the following outline.

A brief look at the Church and Aboriginal peoples

Much has been written on the catastrophic impact of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples, and the part that missions played in the actual and cultural genocide of these peoples and their continuing oppression. I will look at early attitudes with this background in place.

However very little information is published on Catholic attitudes to Aboriginal peoples since invasion; other than publications dedicated to Aboriginal issues, books on Australian Catholicism tend to leave Aboriginal peoples out, with perhaps the odd nod in the introduction.

After the continent of Australia was claimed for England by right of 'discovery' in 1788, and the 'terra nullius' principle unlawfully invoked, the systematic and non-systematic actual and cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples began, in what some commentators term the Aboriginal holocaust.¹⁷⁰ A large contributing factor to this genocide was the actions of missionaries, who felt that the only path to Christ was their own, and that local beliefs and practices must be crushed, by practices such as torture, cultural genocide, and familial destruction, to implement it.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Lindsay-Tjapaltjarri Hermawan, *The Contribution of Aboriginal/Christian Spiritualities to Catholic Identity*, workshop address (Adelaide: Tauondi Aboriginal College, 2015).

¹⁷⁰ Mudrooroo, *Us mob: history, culture, struggle: an introduction to Indigenous Australia* (Sydney & London: Angus & Robertson, 1995), 228.

The Europeans involved in this colonisation process brought with them a religious and cultural identity that had been evolving for centuries. American Religious Studies lecturer David Kline describes a flawed, racialised Christian identity that developed among Europeans in the mediaeval period.¹⁷¹ This identity was based on the notion of blood purity, acquired only through the Eucharist; Christians were distinguished from all those bodies with non-Christian blood.¹⁷² He goes on to explain that this identity was brought to other countries in the process of colonisation, thus beginning the practice of classifying those of non-Christian identity into partial humans or non-humans.¹⁷³

With European expansion into Africa, Christians developed an anti-black identity that classified indigenous peoples according to racial categories, deeming African people “non-human commodities”, based on centuries of Scriptural interpretative precedent and the justification for slavery.¹⁷⁴

From the Middle Ages, the English government justified centuries of brutal colonisation of Ireland, aided by the classification of the Irish people as savage and subhuman.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, even before seeking colonies in the New World, the English had developed a spectrum of social division, at the bottom of which were the irredeemable savages.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ David Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity : Religious Autoimmunity* (Oxford: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 100-101.

¹⁷² Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*, 107.

¹⁷³ Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*, 108.

¹⁷⁴ Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*, 128-134.

¹⁷⁵ Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*, 142.

¹⁷⁶ Kline, *Racism and the Weakness of Christian Identity*, 143.

This designation of “savagery” was brought to Australia with British invaders and quickly applied to the Aboriginal peoples, whose culture, particularly agricultural techniques, were baffling to the newcomers. Unlike other indigenous peoples, Australian Aboriginal peoples were not attributed a category of humanity by the Europeans due to their ignorance of Aboriginal cultures.¹⁷⁷ Aboriginal lack of European-style housing and farming, brain size, a preference for bush life, and phrenology were among the factors that decided European scientists and ethnographers that Aboriginal peoples possessed innate and permanent deficiencies.¹⁷⁸ Aboriginal peoples could not be assimilated into known human categories.¹⁷⁹ As Darwinism emerged, evolutionists developed theories about humans naturally evolving from nature into civilisation; as the Aboriginal “savages” did not do so in their eyes, they were the lowest of all possible racial categories.¹⁸⁰ Scientists and anthropologists from the 1600s-1800s often said that Aboriginal people were not humans but were actually animals - like apes or monkeys, or a missing link between them and humans that was closer to apes than humans.¹⁸¹

This dehumanising of Aboriginal peoples led to them sometimes being classed as vermin, making it easier to commit genocide to facilitate land clearing, rape, and slavery.¹⁸² Colonial officials justified attempts at the total extermination of Aboriginal people by calling them non-human beings.¹⁸³ This dehumanisation recalls Pattel-Gray’s description in the

¹⁷⁷ Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin, “‘The miserablest people in the world’: race, humanism and the Australian Aborigine”, *The Australian journal of anthropology*, 18, no.1 (2007), 3-4.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson and Perrin, *Miserablest people in the world*, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Anderson and Perrin, *Miserablest people in the world*, 5.

¹⁸⁰ Anderson and Perrin, *Miserablest people in the world*, 17-19.

¹⁸¹ Noah Riseman, ‘Racism has a long history we must all understand’ in *The drum* (2013), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-05-30/riseman-racial-slurs-have-a-history/4722082>.

¹⁸² Asafa Jalata, ‘The impacts of English colonial terrorism and genocide on Indigenous/black Australians’, *SAGE Open*, (2013).

¹⁸³ Jalata, *Impacts of English colonial terrorism*.

Introduction, and clarifies the Aboriginal position as being excluded from the revelation of Christ; a revelation that was made for all humanity. Aboriginal peoples were not considered part of that cohort.

This, then, was the attitude prevailing among the Europeans who entered the continent to set up missions. Loos writes of groups of people suddenly finding whites occupying their lands, telling them that there was “only one belief system, Christianity, which replaced their old religions, their old languages, their old customs and values, and their old way of living.” He describes the missionaries as searching for their own significance in alien cultures that they were determined to shape, and Catholic city dwellers and magisterium sitting in pews sanitised from the reality of Aboriginal and missionary experience.¹⁸⁴ When one’s society is pronouncing entire peoples less than human, active cultural genocide, or devastating apathy, takes on an even uglier context. In addition, the prevailing anthropocentricity of the time diminished the place of creation in revelation, and left missionaries unable to relate to Aboriginal theologies that were so land-focussed, and dismissive of peoples who viewed creation as sacred.

From the earliest invasion days, where she described colonial efforts to murder and displace Aboriginal peoples to the Victorian period, historian Lorna Lippmann wrote:

Christian missions continued to receive government assistance and to gather in the remnants of...groups in an ambience resembling that of a British workhouse...Missionaries were time and again to be disappointed that the wholesale

¹⁸⁴ Loos, *White Christ black cross*, ix

conversions which had taken place right throughout the Pacific never occurred in Australia.¹⁸⁵

The failure of these ‘wholesale conversions’ is a blessing in that the resilience of Aboriginal peoples has preserved parts of their Christologies today.

The earliest documentation of the Church on Kurna Country (that I was able to find) ignored Aboriginality almost completely. *The History of the Catholic Church in South Australia*, published in 1896, omits any mention bar one of the people already occupying the Adelaide Plains, yet whom were definitely in the public eye through the establishments of a schoolhouse and ‘native accommodation’ at Pirltawardli in the heart of Adelaide.¹⁸⁶ The dispossession of these ‘least’ did not merit any comment in the earliest Catholic histories of this place.¹⁸⁷ The one reference to Aboriginal people in this volume, written by a priest, is an account of a fellow priest interfering in Aboriginal affairs by approaching a family group and successfully abducting a woman at gunpoint.¹⁸⁸ Recently an early Kurna translation of Ave Maria, recorded by the Jesuits, has come to light, indicating an effort to learn Kurna for missionary purposes, like other missionaries in the area.¹⁸⁹

Maori theologian Dominic O’Sullivan explains that the Australian Catholic Church was born as a convict church, as much of its population and primary activity was established and

¹⁸⁵ Lorna Lippmann, *Generations of resistance: the Aboriginal struggle for justice* (Hong Kong: Sing Cheong Printing Pty Ltd, 1981), 22.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Amery, *Warraparna Kurna! Reclaiming an Australian language* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2016), 64-65.

¹⁸⁷ Frederick Byrne, *History of the Catholic Church in South Australia* (Adelaide: Cole, 1896).

¹⁸⁸ Byrne, *History of the Catholic Church*, 90-92.

¹⁸⁹ This document is yet to be published and is currently being analysed by Kurna Warra Karrpanthi, the legal custodians of the Kurna language. I am privy to this information as an associate member.

carried out by Irish political prisoners. In keeping with the European Christian identity discussed above, they were considered by contemporary Protestant commentators, mainly in government, to be so degraded and lacking in human character that any association between (Irish) Catholics and Aboriginal people was viewed as confirmation of the mutual baseness of these peoples.¹⁹⁰ This resonated with my Irish background and its associated colonisation of country, culture and language.

Despite white attitudes towards Aboriginal people at the time, by the nineteenth century there were voices in the Catholic community protesting the ill-treatment of the Aboriginal population. Comprised largely of a non-English clergy, critics among the Church called for a reversal of policies which destroyed cultures and ill-treated Aboriginal peoples.¹⁹¹

The Catholic Church at this time was functioning in a hostile environment determined to 'exploit and exterminate' Aboriginal peoples and cultures, a stance which the Church officially opposed but in reality presented with a range of responses, including indifference.¹⁹² While O'Sullivan notes individual attempts to care for Aboriginal people without religious imposition, this was outweighed by prevailing missionary attitudes of the time.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Dominic O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation: Catholicism and the politics of Indigeneity* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), 5-8.

¹⁹¹ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 9.

¹⁹² O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 10.

¹⁹³ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 10-11.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was only a small number of Church leaders who took a significant interest in Aboriginal wellbeing.¹⁹⁴ O'Sullivan gives the example of collections for Aboriginal missions, which evoked very poor contributions, as a reflection of lack of interest among Catholic laity and the clergy responsible for promoting these actions.¹⁹⁵

O'Sullivan writes:

From the late eighteenth- to the mid-twentieth century, prelates were influenced by an anthropocentric culture, which marginalised nature and the non-human world. The Aboriginal religions with the spirituality of the land were thus considered inferior and labelled as the works of the devil.¹⁹⁶

This attitude set the scene for governmental action over the next decades in which the Church was not vocal. According to O'Sullivan a reason behind the lack of Catholic action towards the oppression and abuse of Aboriginal peoples is the pre-Vatican II ecclesiology prevailing at that time. He describes the Church as divided into teachers and listeners, who must obey, and notes that this authoritarian style of leadership allowed local bishops to put aside directives from the Holy See regarding Aboriginal peoples, and discouraged criticism from the laity.¹⁹⁷

From 1910, as a result of legislation such as the Assimilation Policy, various integration policies and the White Australia policy, Aboriginal children were removed from their families

¹⁹⁴ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 16-17.

¹⁹⁵ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 17.

¹⁹⁶ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 26.

¹⁹⁷ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 26.

and institutionalised.¹⁹⁸ This practice formally continued until the 1970s, causing huge, ongoing intergenerational trauma and destruction of family and culture.¹⁹⁹

Complete disregard for Aboriginal families and spiritual cultures were reflected in the arbitrary allocation of Christian religions to Aboriginal children;

James Gray of the State Children's Council was asked at the 1913 Royal Commission how he determined the religious denomination of these children: 'We have a rule that every seventh child who comes to us without any religion is a Roman Catholic, the rest as Protestants. We make one-seventh of them Catholics because that is the proportion of Catholics to Protestants in the community.'²⁰⁰

Once turned over to them, Catholic institutions were largely involved in the ill-treatment of Aboriginal children, as recorded by Margaret Brusnahan, who describes herself as 'legally kidnapped' in the 1940s and sent to a Catholic orphanage:

At the orphanage I was always told that I was bad, wicked... I was sent to the Catholic reformatory at twelve as cheeky and uncontrollable. . . I was locked in broom cupboards and made to kneel on split peas with my hands on my head. You thought it would cripple you for life, but it didn't cripple your tongue. . . I had very strong feelings. All I ever wanted was a home and family. . . They'd threaten you with being cracked, with going to a mental asylum. Kids were sent. . . The proof is still there. I was just lucky I got the reformatory. . . All the God-fearing people I met, all those Christians didn't practise what they preached... There's a lot of pain in having fingers, legs broken. But it takes a lot longer to repair spirits, minds. That takes a whole lifetime. When you're adult and you can't accept that anybody loves you. That's because some other parts of you have been broken.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Australians Together, *The stolen generations: the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* (2018), www.australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/stolen-generations.

¹⁹⁹ In personal conversation with Kurna-Narungga community members and in the course of my work in Aboriginal education, I learn that Aboriginal children are, at the date of writing, being removed in greater numbers than during the Stolen Generation period. These community members feel the Stolen Generation has never ended.

²⁰⁰ John Harris, *One blood; two hundred years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity* (NSW: Albatross Books Pty Ltd, 1990), 596.

²⁰¹ Margaret Brusnahan, "The shielding of the dying" in *One blood*, 593-594.

While children were being forcibly removed from their parents and moved between foster homes and institutions, adults were barred from leaving their designated missions, further breaking down traditional spiritual knowledge and practices. For many Kurna people, this meant forced removal to different nations away from their spiritual places of resonance, such as Bukkiyana (Point Pearce mission on Narungga Country) and Raukkan (Point McLeay mission on Ngarrindjeri Country).

When the Assimilation Policy was formally implemented in 1951, O'Sullivan notes that prelate attitudes of white superiority, while at odds with the magisterium, were prevalent enough to allow for endorsement of child removal through accepting stolen children. This sanction was not public, but a refusal to co-operate might have put pressure on the viability of the practice.²⁰² In other words, the practical support of the Catholic Church provided survival for a practice, which among other things but for the purpose of this thesis, actively contributed to religious destruction among Aboriginal communities, including Jesus-knowledge.

Jesuit commentator Brian McCoy affirms the Catholic Church's involvement with government policies that involved the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, and recognises the social legacy additionally caused by the dormitory accommodation

²⁰² O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 32-33.

system of Catholic missions, that severed the continuation of language and culture for generations of Aboriginal children.²⁰³

Pattel-Gray observes:

The Australian church, in its activities and teachings, continually contradicted the liberating truth of Jesus Christ. It refused to speak the truth in the face of dispossession, massacres, cultural genocide, physical and mental tortures of many kinds, and more... (it) propagated and implemented a theology that was heretical, as it did not search for the ultimate truth but rather stopped short in the netherworld of racism, genocide and oppression against Australian Aboriginal People.²⁰⁴

Pattel-Gray describes a 'white Jesus', who had been given Western cultural attributes, and who was used to oppress.²⁰⁵ She continues, 'In many ways, Jesus Christ was a stranger to the Europeans who claimed to be bringing 'Christianity' to Australia...Aboriginal People's experiences of the transcendent were expected to be limited to white Western understandings.'²⁰⁶ She also writes of church collusion with the government from early 1800s onwards and including the Stolen Generations. Her research reveals atrocious cases, including Catholic examples such as the French priest, Father Francis Xavier Gsell, who conducted 'black slave traffic' (his words) from the mission he established. This priest had the approval of the Australian Government and the apostolic blessing of Pope Pius XII. He was later made Bishop of Darwin, and awarded the Order of the British Empire.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Lyn Henderson-Yates, Brian McCoy, and Melissa Brickell, "The glass wall between us" in *Take off your shoes, walk on the ground: the journey towards reconciliation in Australia* (NSW: Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2012), 21-22.

²⁰⁴ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 121.

²⁰⁵ Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 122-123.

²⁰⁶ Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 123.

²⁰⁷ Pattel-Gray, *The great white flood*, 141-142.

Further examination of Catholic institutions upholding racist and destructive legislation can be found in Chapter 3, 'Racism in the Australian Church' in *Great White Flood*.

From the 1960s, Church thinking became more consistent in its support for Indigenous aspiration. Vatican II was a time when the Church consciously decided to repudiate racism at a theoretical level, and there was therefore an accompanying requirement to challenge it in the public arena.²⁰⁸ We see this of course in a very public and practical fashion in the delivery of the Papal Address which underpins this project. In 1964 principal conciliar document *Lumen Gentium* was published, incorporating principles, influenced by Karl Rahner, that will subsequently be discussed with regard to non-Aboriginal views on Aboriginal Christianity. A primary theme was the universality of Spirit to all peoples.

O'Sullivan notes that in the 1960s to 1980s, political events such as the constitutional referendum laid foundations for more widespread support for Aboriginal communities among non-Aboriginal communities.²⁰⁹ In 1967 the Australian Council of Churches adopted the position that first occupation was a legitimate basis for a right to land ownership, a position contested by the Commonwealth.²¹⁰ In 1968, the Bishops' Conference, in response to Vatican II, created the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. This body issued statements in 1969, 1971, 1972, and 1978, growing in explicit support for Aboriginal land rights, self-determination and other ways in which religious objectives should be achieved by political means.²¹¹ This activity indicates a growing preparedness to include and support Aboriginal identity and autonomy, leading to the eventual environment in which I write.

²⁰⁸ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, xxi

²⁰⁹ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 81-86.

²¹⁰ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 87-92.

²¹¹ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 139-143.

Vatican II illuminated Christianity in local contexts. As a result, during this period, Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) was the first Pope to meet and address Aboriginal people in their homeland, prior to the Address informing this thesis. A year after this address, Pope Paul VI convened a synod entitled *Justice in the World*. The resulting paper expressed the bishops' commitment to maintenance of cultural identity, the human right to equal development through their own culture, and exploration of the way in which evangelisation was carried out in such a way as to uphold human rights.²¹² Meanwhile, Lippmann writes that by the 1970s, church missions on which people were living were 'the antithesis of traditional living, consisting as they did of large, often unrelated groups, under the petty autocracy of white staff.'²¹³ The magisterium was moving towards honouring Aboriginal Christianity, but not the institutions set up in Jesus' name to do his work.

A document released by the Vatican in 1974, entitled *The Church and Human Rights*, was a guide for promoting and expanding human rights, and explains that as Jesus Christ was made flesh within the context of a specific culture himself, he sanctified all humanity and blessed all cultures. In 1975, Pope VI released *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which discusses evangelisation to diverse cultures, representing a shift away from previous practices that required cultures to adopt Christianity and Western culture as well.²¹⁴ These documents provided external context for the Aboriginal communities that were beginning to establish a voice. Nungalinga College was established in Darwin in 1973 by the Anglican and uniting churches to provide culturally relevant theological accreditation to religious and lay people to

²¹² Michael Stogre, *That the world may believe: the development of Papal social thought on aboriginal rights* (Canada: Editions Paulines, 1992), 163-166.

²¹³ Lippmann, *Generations of resistance*, 93.

²¹⁴ Stogre, *That the world may believe*, 169.

take back to their communities.²¹⁵ In time, a QLD branch, called Wontulp-Bi-Buya, was established, and this is also supported by the Catholic and Lutheran churches. Loos connects the establishment these institutions with greater leadership in the church by ordained Aboriginal leaders.²¹⁶ However, during this period I can find limited scholarly writing on Aboriginal Catholicism outside references to Compass articles in 1978 and 1982 (Compass was a Catholic theological journal published 1967-2016).²¹⁷

Of the late 1960s and 1970s, Randall wrote of the Quakers arranging for Aboriginal people to travel to metropolitan areas to give talks. He wrote, 'At this time in Australia's history, it was only the Quakers who helped us in this way. No other church was willing to do it...'²¹⁸

In 1986 came the Papal Address to the Aboriginal community at Alice Springs, which encouraged this project and as such is discussed more vigorously in the ninth chapter. In this section, I note its place in the development of the timeline. Catholic theologian Sandie Cornish noted that while the particular rights of indigenous peoples have not been presented in modern papal documents to date, the speeches of John Paul II have clarified the Papal position in the area, and that a recurrent theme in these speeches has been the right to cultural distinction.²¹⁹ O'Sullivan noted poor media and political reception of John Paul's II's Papal Address, but nonetheless John Paul II called a Synod of Bishops in Oceania in

²¹⁵ Loos, *White Christ black cross*, 153.

²¹⁶ Loos, *White Christ black cross*, 152-152.

²¹⁷ Peter Malone, "Discovering..." in *Discovering an Australian theology*, ed. Peter Malone (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1998), 15.

²¹⁸ Randall, *Songman*, 96.

²¹⁹ Sandie Cornish, *ACSJC occasional paper no. 21: the Catholic human rights tradition and the rights of indigenous peoples* (Victoria: Collins Dove, 1994), 17.

1998–1999, to consider in part reconciliation.²²⁰ In 1988, the Vatican reaffirmed sections of *Lumen Gentium* referring to unity among people, and the fact that Christ transcends the distinctions of race and nationality, in its commissioned statement on racism.²²¹ These efforts represent a willingness to hear cultural views on Jesus Christ.

In the 1990s, the term ‘Reconciliation’ was adopted as a formal movement to negotiate fairer processes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. It is a process in which Australian communities continue to engage today.²²² In September 1991 the Roman Catholic Church in Queensland formed the national Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council, adding to the Aboriginal voice on issues of Reconciliation. Reconciliation is an influence on this project, with its foundational principles of listening, recognising injustice, respect, and building new ways to move forward together more justly.

The late Archbishop of Adelaide, Leonard Faulkner, wrote that reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian message, referencing injustices meted out to the Aboriginal communities as vital issues to be addressed so that our country is built on truth and not lies. He wrote that as Christian believers, leadership in reconciliation with Aboriginal people, and acknowledging and seeking to redress the ‘sinful situation’ is central to our vocation.²²³

²²⁰ Cornish, *ACSJC occasional paper*, 145-148.

²²¹ Pontifical Commission *Iustitia et Pax*, *The Church and racism* (Vatican City, 1988), 31.

²²² Among some Elders of the Kurna community among whom I live, the term “conciliation” is preferred. As Uncle Stephen Goldsmith explained to me, the term “reconciliation” infers a previous relationship. This relationship did not exist, therefore an inaugural conciliation needs to be effected.

²²³ O’Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 118-119.

As part of the movement to address the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal Children and their subsequent systematic abuse, the inaugural National Sorry Day was held in 1998. The Church's association with this event, and a statement from the *Bishops seek forgiveness from "the Stolen Generation" on National Sorry Day*, along with continent-wide church activities, highlighted the relationship between reconciliation as a theological concept and a political goal.²²⁴ This represents a further willingness to hear, at least on paper.

There are now several institutions of Aboriginal Christianity, from local charismatic movements such as Yolngu for Jesus to national bodies such as the Uniting Church's Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Each have diverse and comprehensive ministries informed by their missionary histories, and increasingly in the Anglican and Uniting traditions, local Aboriginal traditions. In my own Church, there is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, an advisory body to Australian Bishops established in 1992. This Council notes that, since 1986, the year of the Papal Address in Alice Springs, there has been a 186% growth in Aboriginal Catholics.²²⁵ This is a statistic that should encourage more dialogue between black and white Australian Catholics.

However, despite this seeming movement of the Church to support Aboriginal issues, in a practical sense, we have some way to travel. In the Introduction, a smoking ceremony was mentioned. An anonymous member of the community expressed her anger and sadness to me at this incident occurring at a Mass 'around three years ago' at our local cathedral, St.

²²⁴ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics and reconciliation*, 123.

²²⁵ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, website home page (2017) <https://www.natsicc.org.au/>.

Francis Xavier of Adelaide.²²⁶ This cathedral is situated on an important ancestral site for the Kurna people, Tarntanyangga. Aboriginal Catholics were invited to share liturgy by conducting a smoking ceremony; but they were instructed to hold the ceremony outside the walls of the cathedral. This incident sparked grief and deep resentment among this person and several people present at our discussion. People maintained that God was to be found as immediately in the outdoors as within the cathedral; but it was the exclusionary decision that caused hurt.

This anecdote seems to me to sum up this brief history of the Church's attitude in Australia. It has, in latter years, tried to respond pastorally to communities in a greater sense, as seen in the documents mentioned above and religious and educators who spend their time trying to stand with Aboriginal communities. The Church has publicly supported some political initiatives, and provides, through its charitable institutions, some measures of support. But anecdotally, I see for more Catholics in church than at land rights rallies. I do not see Aboriginal representation in parishes other than those dedicated to Aboriginal communities.

Ultimately, when it comes to the most sacred places of our religious expression, the door is shut to Aboriginal Catholics. You may not bring your smoking ceremony inside the walls. It seems the superiority complex described earlier in this chapter often continues at an institutionalised level.

²²⁶ Parishioner requesting anonymity at The Otherway Centre (Aboriginal Catholic Ministry), interview with author, August 2019.

Academically, however, there is wide support among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics to learn about and embrace Aboriginal spirituality, as seen in the Methodology chapter.

To move forward in a more just way, it is time to listen to this often-excluded knowledge and share what we non-Aboriginal Australians are allowed to learn, for the history of everyone who lives here, but especially the owners of the land. With one view of the Church and Jesus in my history, I needed a new paradigm to allow me to observe more widely; but one that fitted my personal Catholic context for authentic assimilation of ideas.

Framing my approach with Catholic theologians

In seeking an appropriate way to synthesise what I was learning, I decided to choose certain Catholic theologians whose work, to me, reflected areas that Aboriginal knowledge might recognise. Rather than drawing parallels between traditions, I realised, while listening and learning, that there were some areas in contemporary Catholic scholarship which resonated with Aboriginal material enough to form possible bridges of appreciation. These themes included the cosmic Christ, Jesus as Wisdom incarnate, and the universality of the Spirit. The areas cannot be matched, as such, but rather areas of familiarity listened for. These theologians were chosen not only because they articulate my cultural approach, and allow me to respond within my reflexive ethnography, but because their writing in the areas above presents material that connects to participant data sufficiently for me to view that material coherently from my personal lens.

I now revisit my main research question:

Is the figure of Jesus Christ recognised by Australian Aboriginal Christians as a pre-invasion presence, and how is it inculturated by these Christians?

In the following chapters I will discuss recognition of this pre-invasion presence by participants in the project in terms of the spirit of Jesus. This spirit resonates with the cosmic Christ articulated by theologians Karl Rahner, Celia Deane Drummond, and Denis Edwards. This resonance connects my context as a white Catholic to participant material. In this chapter, I will discuss these selected theologians' views that support this connection. These will then sit in conversation with participants' views across the subsequent three chapters, which explore the eternal Christ, presented facets of Jesus, and inculturation of Jesus respectively.

These theologians may well be expressing theological truths already present and articulated in Aboriginal societies centuries ago, as will be seen in participant material to follow. I do not seek to position Aboriginal knowledge within a white frame, or privilege white theology, or preface Aboriginal knowledge with a white framework; merely to seek voices in my own cultural context who may open my thinking and position to be receptive to Aboriginal teaching in areas that may bridge.

Karl Rahner influenced Vatican II greatly, and his themes occurred in the Papal Address on which I base this project. Rahner's contributions to the Council around concepts such as the Church is the People of God (Chapter Two) and the Universal Call to Holiness in the Church (Chapter Five) opened up the Church to more generous views of people outside the

dominant white culture and outside the Church. His work represented a departure from the damnation of all those outside the Catholic religion previously upheld by the Vatican, and allowed for expressions such as the Papal Address.

A development in Rahner's ecclesiology over Vatican II showed a changing attitude towards the world. Before the council, he referred to the Church as salvation for the individual, identifying the Church almost exclusively with the Catholic Church. After Vatican II, he described the Church as salvation for the world. Rahner's attitude moved to become more open to grace that can occur outside the Church. Rather than a departure from his standpoint, this represented expansion of his original ideas.²²⁷

In the same vein of development, Denis Edwards builds on Rahner's work to explore Jesus incarnated as divine Wisdom. Celia Deane-Drummond also writes on Jesus as a Creation-centred expression of Wisdom, present in the evolutionary process from the beginning. These three voices will contribute to the conversation around the way in which Jesus appears in these selected Aboriginal communities, particularly through the vision of Jesus as divine Wisdom incarnated.

These theologians all represent radical thought in their own way; Rahner with his contributions to conciliar thought and documents more inclusive than before; and Edwards and Deane-Drummond with their developments of Vatican II thought into the cosmic nature of a Christ present in an evolutionary sense, and Jesus as Wisdom personified.

²²⁷ John Ackley, *The Church of the Word: a comparative study of Word, Church and office in the thought of Karl Rahner and Gerhard Ebeling* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 1993), 179-180.

Christian theology and missiology has proceeded on the exclusivity of Jesus for so long on this continent (and others), engendering misunderstanding, exclusivity and antagonism. I do not claim to find easy resonance or simplistic 'matches' between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal traditions; rather, I seek the transformation and opening of thought effected by these three theologians in my own Church to allow me to receive and be transformed in turn by Aboriginal thought.

Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit theologian, is widely known as a prolific writer and authority on Roman Catholicism. Some of Rahner's ideas, conceptualised in *Lumen Gentium* and inherent in the Papal address, find a place within the material generated by this project and form common ground for discussion.

This project seeks to effect some measure of change in the way non-Aboriginal people think and feel about Aboriginal Christologies. Rahner was a Roman Catholic theologian who was himself an agent of change. He was born in 1904 into one kind of Catholic Church, and died in 1984 in a different one, due in part to his own prolific writings.²²⁸ His contributions to conciliar documents, in particular, had a lasting effect on the Church's pastoral practices.

In 1962 Rahner was appointed as a *peritus*, expert advisor, by Pope John XXIII for the Second Vatican Council. Rahner's influence appeared in discussions around, among other

²²⁸ Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner* (Fount Paperbacks: Great Britain, 1997), xi.

topics, the relationship of the Church to the modern world, and the possibility of salvation outside the Church even for nonbelievers.²²⁹ Rahner's successor to his professorship in Munster wrote that Rahner 'was active at the Council to the point of exhaustion.'²³⁰

Rahner did not deny doctrine, but placed emphasis on interpretation. This is what allows, through the lens of the Papal Address, examination of participant material for Christologies that may look different from those enshrined in non-Aboriginal communities.

Compared to other areas of his Christology about which he wrote prolifically, Rahner wrote comparatively little about placement of Jesus at the beginning of time. This is such an established doctrine through the Bible, Trinitarian theologies and established in the Chalcedonian and Nicene Creeds, that Rahner, as an ordained Catholic priest, hardly had to argue it. It is assumed through his work, highlighted by the fact that he did write extensively on his Trinitarian theories of the immanent and economic Trinities.²³¹ His Trinitarian work implies and inherently places the Logos, as part of the Trinity, at the beginning of time.

Edwards wrote that 'in his major systematic works...Rahner does not explore the relationship between the Risen Christ and the cosmos...there is no real treatment of the Cosmic Christ.'²³² However, he does note that insights from Rahner's work can infer perspectives on the cosmic Christ that we will discuss through participant contribution.

²²⁹Jim Campbell, "Karl Rahner, SJ" in *Ignatian Spirituality* (Loyola Press, 2021), <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/20th-century-ignatian-voices/karl-rahner-sj/>.

²³⁰ Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: an introduction to his life and thought* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), 100.

²³¹ David Budiash, "Fundamental Theology for the Trinity: Karl Rahner's Contribution" in *Heythrop Journal* vol 57, no. 6 (November 2016).

²³² Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991), 122.

Edwards points out that Rahner described Christ as 'the centre of Creation' and that through his death he becomes open to the whole of cosmic reality. He explains that for Rahner, Jesus, a grace-filled, human part of the biological evolution of the universe, became the centre of Creation when in death Christ spilled out over the cosmos.²³³ Interestingly, Rahner also referred to the Earth as 'our Mother', a term adopted by very many Aboriginal people many years before.²³⁴

For Rahner, there was one true Christ event where the spirit of Jesus became a human being in Palestine as the ultimate act of God's self-revelation and the pinnacle of Creation. He called this person the 'absolute Savior'.²³⁵ For Rahner, Jesus is the only way to God.²³⁶ He argues that it is:

...only in Jesus that God's self-communication to all creatures reaches its tangible and concrete position in history. Here at one point in space and time, in one flesh and blood person, God's self-communication is both given irrevocably and accepted radically.²³⁷

Rahner points to a cosmic element of Christ when he refers to him as 'this finite concrete being, this contingent being, who remains in all eternity.'²³⁸ Some participants will argue that this eternal Christ has multiple concrete points in time of being with us, entering and

²³³ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 123-4.

²³⁴ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 123.

²³⁵ Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations 5: later writings* (London: Longman, Darton and Todd, 1966), 193.

²³⁶ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 126.

²³⁷ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 85.

²³⁸ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 3: the theology of the spiritual life* (London: Longman, Darton and Todd, 1967), 44.

reentering humanity from his eternal position. For Rahner, however, with Jesus of Nazareth's death, 'the history of revelation proper has come to an end.'²³⁹

Rahner placed his evolutionary theology within the Scotist school, which views Creation and incarnation as related dimensions of God's self-communication to the world, rather than a position that sees the incarnation as designed to redeem the world from sin.²⁴⁰ Rahner's position, that the incarnation was always part of God's plan, will be argued to potentially support the multiple incarnation position that is held by several participants in upcoming chapters.

Rahner is well-known for his work on obediential potency; the human inner wellspring of grace and reflection, the spark of divinity within us that yearns for the infinite Spirit. It is God's self-offering received by the obediential potency in humanity that we seek, and that reached its highest fulfilment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, producing the doctrine of Hypostatic Union:

The Hypostatic Union means that in the human reality of Jesus, God's absolute self-communication is simply and irrevocably present; it is both declaration and acceptance, both something effected by God himself and a reality of God himself, unmixed and yet inseparable and hence irrevocable. Such is likewise the pledge of grace to us.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Karl Rahner, "The death of Jesus and the finality of revelation" in Karl Rahner & Wilhelm Thüsing, *A new Christology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 32.

²⁴⁰ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 87.

²⁴¹ Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: a critical study of his major themes* (USA: Fordham University Press, 2002), 145-146.

Rahner's views on hypostatic union and its frequency will be challenged by some participants, opening up new directions for this understanding.

Edwards observes that for Rahner,

...the divine nature of Jesus Christ is precisely the same divine nature which is creatively at work in all cosmic history. It is the power of self-transcendence at the heart of the universe. The risen Christ is radically and permanently one with the absolute being which empowers the universe. Jesus the Jew, born of Mary, like us forged from stardust, is truly the Cosmic Christ.²⁴²

Rahner was deeply impressed by the everydayness of Jesus of Nazareth's life. He wrote, 'that which is amazing and even confusing in the life of Jesus...is that it remains completely within the framework of everyday living.'²⁴³

Jesus walks with participants in their everyday lives, when making vestments, singing, healing, and eating. However, a fundamental aspect of Rahner's theology was that human beings are all transcendent beings through virtue of Creation.²⁴⁴ This will offer comparison with the way in which some participants feel they engage with the Spirit of Jesus Christ on an everyday basis.

Another characteristic of Rahner was his willingness to seek the sacred in all fabrics of life:

We do not believe that it is bound to be certain and obvious in advance that orthodox faith in Jesus as the Christ can only and exclusively be expressed in the

²⁴² Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 129.

²⁴³ Harvey Egan, *Karl Rahner: mystic of everyday life* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 131.

²⁴⁴ Geoffrey Kelly, *Rahner: theologian of the graced search for meaning* (Scotland: Ausgburg Fortress, 1993), 35.

formulations of the classical Christology of the western Church, even though these formulations are undoubtedly normative for our faith today...²⁴⁵

This conviction is found in Rahner's theory of anonymous Christianity, which responds to the question of those outside the church, to whom surely God offers love. If people engage with the infinite, and accept and love human emotions (that are God-inspired), then they are still seen by Rahner to be accepting God's offer of love, and accepting it by their emotional response. Christianity is not articulated, but exists in this human acceptance of God's self-revelation. This project's participants do articulate Christianity, but the theory illustrates Rahner's systematic conclusion of an inclusive God.²⁴⁶

A famous axiom of Karl Rahner's was that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa, meaning that God communicates Godself to humanity (economic Trinity) as God is in divine life (immanent Trinity). This establishes that the Logos is a distinct presence with mission proper to itself, in contrast with other divine Persons.²⁴⁷

These major themes of Rahner's Christologies will be discussed alongside participant wisdom, being both challenged and contextualised.

Through his work on Vatican II, Rahner opened the door for Catholics to see other cultures differently. It is within this context that I will engage with the theologies outlined above.

²⁴⁵ Karl Rahner, "Christology today" in Rahner and Thüsing, *A new Christology*, 4.

²⁴⁶ Gerald McCool, *A Rahner reader* (London: ue Seabury Press Inc, 1975), 211-212.

²⁴⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Continuum, 1970), 21-23.

Celia Deane-Drummond is a Catholic theologian whose work largely centres on science and ecotheology, often in dialogue with Thomas Aquinas' theology on divine image-bearing.²⁴⁸ Also frequently incorporated is Hans Urs von Balthasar's concept of theo-drama.²⁴⁹ Deane-Drummond writes about a cosmic Christ who cares for Creation and has been imbedded in it since time began. It is an area of theological thinking that offers a way for many Catholics to make a connection with Aboriginal knowledge, as the two understandings are analogous.

Deane-Drummond draws on precedents within church history to illustrate a theological appreciation of nature. From early Celtic saints, to Augustine, Aquinas and St Francis of Assisi, she demonstrates an historic engagement with Creation that is God-based in its approach and sense of wonder and joy when engaging with Creation and its inherent holiness as God's Creation.²⁵⁰

Deane-Drummond also points to wisdom, as connected to an understanding of how we see God, as something inherent in Creation. She uses engagement with Biblical Wisdom texts, and theologians over the ages, to support ecotheological approaches. Wisdom and Proverbs passages are used to argue the presence of Wisdom at the very beginning of time.²⁵¹ St Bonaventure cited the book of Wisdom 11:21-22 to support the idea that the love of

²⁴⁸ Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's image and likeness in humans and other animals: performative soul-making and graced nature" in *Zygon*, vol. 47, no.4 (December 2012).

²⁴⁹ Celia Deane-Drummond, "Christ and evolution: a drama of Wisdom?" in *Zygon*, vol. 47, no.3 (September 2012).

²⁵⁰ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom: conversations in science, spirituality and theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2006), 38-39.

²⁵¹ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 96-97.

Creation leads to the love of God.²⁵² She cites contemporary theologians such as Norman Habel who point to Wisdom as embedded in nature.²⁵³

Deane-Drummond connects this Wisdom to Christ. For Deane-Drummond, approaching the perception of Jesus as human but also divine is facilitated by considering Christ as divine Wisdom incarnate.²⁵⁴

Deane-Drummond engages with a kenotic Christ figure, which reflects his representation in the Trinity from the beginning.²⁵⁵ She uses the Gospels of Paul and John to connect the preexistent, cosmic nature of Jesus to Creation and express the Logos as Wisdom incarnate:

The opening words of the Gospel of John ... speak of Logos as that which orders Creation in a way that parallels almost exactly the role of Wisdom in Proverbs.²⁵⁶

Deane-Drummond sees a strong identification between divine Wisdom and Christ in church tradition. She sees two distinct scriptural approaches: the synoptic view, presenting Jesus as the teacher of Wisdom, and the Johannine view, Jesus himself becomes identified with God's Wisdom.²⁵⁷

²⁵² Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 57.

²⁵³ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 65.

²⁵⁴ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution: wonder and wisdom* (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2009), 94.

²⁵⁵ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution: a drama of wisdom*, 57.

²⁵⁶ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 102.

²⁵⁷ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom: theology and the new biology* (Edinburgh; T&T Clark, 2000), 44.

Deane-Drummond writes that Wisdom 'shows a particular pluralistic view on life that includes social, human, and cosmic aspects.'²⁵⁸ These aspects will be apparent in the stories to follow.

Deane-Drummond's view on God as one who is essentially in relationship; in communion; agrees with Rahner.²⁵⁹ Discussion of Jesus' incarnation as a way to identify more materially with the world, and identify more profoundly with the natural order, places a more ecotheological perspective on Rahner's view and connects to upcoming Aboriginal understandings of Christ as indwelling in Country as well as people.

Deane-Drummond describes Christ thus:

We can think of the whole of evolutionary history being caught up into Christ, as Christ is one who enters into the heart of the evolutionary process, being present with all biological life in what we might care to term a deep incarnation.²⁶⁰

She sees all nonhuman creatures, and evolutionary processes, as theodramatic; part of God's activity wherein Christ emerges from this context of wholistic Creation and all activity of life.²⁶¹

While creaturely wisdom is in concert with divine Wisdom in the Creation of the world, the two come together perfectly in the person of Christ.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 27.

²⁵⁹ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 109-110.

²⁶⁰ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 117.

²⁶¹ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution, a drama of Wisdom?* 48-59.

²⁶² Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution, a drama of Wisdom?* 185.

Aligning with Rahner, Deane-Drummond notes that ‘revelation in Christ does not come simply alongside Creation, as if in competition with it, but rather appears within it, showing Christ’s uniqueness through his ordinariness.’²⁶³

Deane-Drummond also writes on divine image-bearing and the attribution of personhood traits to animals, sharing the likeness of God if not God’s image.²⁶⁴ In response to her perceived ontological gap between humans and creatures, she has developed a Christology that allows Christ to encompass both divine and creaturely Wisdom.²⁶⁵

Denis Edwards

Denis Edwards was an Australian Catholic priest interested particularly in ecotheology. He wrote comprehensively on identification of Jesus with Sophia, the Wisdom woman of God, and as described in an earlier section, was committed to recognition of and respect for Aboriginal spirituality.

During his lifetime, I was fortunate enough to study briefly under Denis Edwards. He was passionate about learning about and respecting Aboriginal spirituality and evolving Catholic response to it. He wrote that ‘Christian theology always needs to be done again. There is always the need to attempt to grasp the “good news of God” (Rom 1:1) from the

²⁶³ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution, a drama of Wisdom?* 138.

²⁶⁴ Celia Deane-Drummond, “Are animals moral? Taking soundings through vice, virtue, conscience and imago Dei”, eds. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough, *Creaturely theology: on God, humans and other animals* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 190-210.

²⁶⁵ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution: a drama of Wisdom?*

perspective of a new cultural context.²⁶⁶ This outlook makes him an ideal partner for the conversation to follow.

On his engagement with Aboriginal Christian communities, he wrote of Warmun leader Hector Sundaloo:

He sees Christian faith as building on the ancient wisdom which is his heritage. It seemed to me that his 'two-way' view was not a facile syncretism, but an authentic capacity to draw on two interrelated but distinct sources of wisdom.²⁶⁷

Edwards had faith in a cosmic Christ, and built on Rahner's views of an evolutionary Christ to write of the cosmic Christ.

He was progressive in his interpretation of the conciliar discussions around other religions, and wrote that Christians need not insist that Jesus is normative or definitive.²⁶⁸ He saw the Wisdom of the cosmic Christ as recognisable and recognised across global cultures, while remaining committed to Jesus of Nazareth as the one historical, revolutionary climax of God and evolution's self-offerings and acceptance. Edwards wrote that Christians who see Jesus as the Wisdom of God can recognise that this same Wisdom may well find expression in other religious traditions.²⁶⁹

Denis Edwards cited renowned theologian Edward Schillebeeckx in supporting his stance that through Jesus' humanity, "what is revealed of the infinite mystery of God in Jesus is

²⁶⁶ Denis Edwards, *The God of evolution: a Trinitarian theology* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999), 3.

²⁶⁷ Denis Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God: an ecological theology* (NSW: St Pauls, 1995), 64.

²⁶⁸ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 65.

²⁶⁹ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 65.

necessarily limited and partial and finite.”²⁷⁰ He goes on: ‘to deny this would mean effectively denying the true humanity of Jesus Christ. God is absolute, but no one religion is absolute, including Christianity.’²⁷¹

Edwards places focus on Jesus’ humanity throughout his discussion of the cosmic Christ:

In the Resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth becomes the Cosmic Christ. The risen Christ is the power of the divine at the heart of the Creation, but this divine power is now mediated through the humanity of Jesus, the first fruits of the new Creation.²⁷²

Participant knowledge will illustrate how divine power is mediated through humanity, and how this is essential to the way Jesus works in their communities; however the fruits have been present for gathering since the beginning of Creation, and ongoing.

Edwards’ voice allows non-Aboriginal Catholics to examine participant material with eyes unencumbered by allegiance to ‘absolutes’ or doctrine that Edwards acknowledges can be exclusive and not admitting of the fullness of God and Jesus.

Towards listening

I now turn to the richness of the participant material itself, to seek recognition of any Catholic concepts within that may inform my understanding.

²⁷⁰ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 65.

²⁷¹ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 65-66.

²⁷² Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 131.

Throughout the following chapters, large passages of data are presented in the participants' original words. This allows transparency, avoids the aforementioned colonial research tradition of speaking for Aboriginal people, and avoids interpretative pitfalls associated with paraphrasing. To return to Guest and MacQueen:

We have also highlighted the related importance of making data and the analytic process transparent so that others have enough information to fairly judge research findings. Nothing in qualitative research is more important to these ends than using verbatim quotes. In Chenail's (1995) words, quotes are the "stars" of qualitative research. They bring the raw data—the participants' words—to the reader and are what connect the phenomenological world of the participant to the data summary and interpretation generated by the researcher (Guest & MacQueen, 2008).²⁷³

In addition, the words of the participants are of interest and bring a range of character to the Jesus stories.

Analysing the data, it emerged that there were certain areas of commonality among participants regarding their perspectives of Jesus. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, all participants concurred that the Trinity (and therefore, the spirit of Jesus) has been in Australia since the beginning of time. All participants also agreed that the spirit of Jesus is distinct from other spiritual beings in their respective traditions. Thirdly, all participants assigned roles to Jesus explicitly or implicitly. These roles are where inculturation of Jesus was most apparent, and can be most obviously compared to Western Christologies. These areas will be discussed in the following chapters respectively.

²⁷³ Guest et al, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 18.

CHAPTER FIVE: The eternal presence of Jesus on Country

Jesus works in so many ways. Jesus is everywhere.

Claire

Arrernte Catholic woman

Jesus Christ is in all of us. Through the Holy Spirit, he's not just in one place, he's everywhere.

Participant C

In this chapter I discuss participant views regarding the presence of Jesus' spirit in Australia prior to invasion. This presence is often couched in seemingly Trinitarian terms, and this is addressed in the latter part of the chapter.

Projection

Before examining the material, it is important to discuss one issue that presents throughout the participants' material; that of projection. How is it possible to determine material that is authentically pre-invasion, and not appropriated from or imposed upon by missionary history? Some material is quite clearly post-invasion doctrine, for example when the Bible is quoted. My response to this is twofold.

Firstly, to question the veracity of the participants goes against every ethical point explained in the methodology chapter. If I am told by Aboriginal authorities that material is pre-invasion material, I accept this. In most cases throughout the following three chapters it will

be quickly appreciated that the distinction is sometimes impossible to make. It is not a white woman's place, outside this ontological framework, to state what is truth, but the participants' as they see it. Theological truth, and the things community members believe in, take precedence in my enquiry over western ethnocentric judgements on temporal historicity.

Secondly, the material that is sourced from non-Aboriginal contexts is obvious. I accept it for what it is, as part of the differentiated fabric of Aboriginal Christianity, and move on to explore other aspects of belief that are more compelling for this research question. Material that is not so clearly mission-based is what will be focused on for discussion. In addition, some material is obviously mission-inspired in terminology, for example the Johannine language Mia uses to describe her painting is an early example in the discussion below. However, when speaking to people about their faith, it is obvious to me that these forms of expression are used to explain concepts that were preexisting in the Country, and a degree of syncretism is occurring based on genuinely similar doctrines.

History professor Noel Loos states that Aboriginal Christians he has worked with are unconcerned about whether white Australians reject their beliefs or are skeptical about them. He cites Wayne Connolly: 'That doesn't worry us really because we believe that the Lord is at work here and accept it.'²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ Loos, *White Christ black cross*, 165.

Ultimately, it is the Lord's work and how people engage with that that I am concerned with here.

To quote John 18:38, what is truth?

Skye is adamant that any projection points past missionary activity to previous genuine connection, writing of what Rahner would call the obediential potency informing people and shaping their reception to Christ without any white interference:

These Indigenous People become aware of the lack of wholeness the pre-inculturated Word of God is bringing to them, and they realise that wholeness is a state of being that God wants them to have... [Australian Aboriginal women] have pierced through the pre-inculturated layers of Christian doctrine to discover its true essence, the hermeneutics that bring them wholeness... [they] met Christ in spirit before they were able to understand biblical teachings...their [spiritual ontology] allowed this spiritual relationship to occur before they were aware of the Bible, and the Bible simply validated their experience of this relationship with God.²⁷⁵

One final note I add here is that the participants presenting in this and the subsequent two chapters are speaking for themselves, not their entire nations. While many community members agreed with taught material at the time of yarning, there also exists diversity. Uncle Robert Taylor in my reference group comments, 'We have many different beliefs and traditions because God gave us the right knowledge depending on where you live, what Country.' As mentioned previously, the complexity and sophistication of Aboriginal religious systems, and access to non-community members, is such that these chapters can only be a snapshot of the underlying theologies.

²⁷⁵ Skye, *Yiminga calling*, 199.

Jesus' spirit was here pre-invasion

Every participant was emphatic in their assertion that the Spirit of Jesus has existed in this continent since the beginning of time.

Participants A , B and C referred to Scripture in their interviews, with emphasis on John 1:1 and Jesus as Logos at the very beginning, with God. Participant B referred to Genesis:

[Jesus] was the first one who was here. Genesis 1 says he came to this place. He was here in the beginning... [Jesus' spirit] has been here in Australia since before the human Jesus died [in Palestine]. Before that. Before he dies. In the beginning his spirit was moving.

Participant C commented:

The spirit of Jesus...he was with God, you know? So that was-well how long ago that was...since Creation. Even Prophet Isaiah speaks about Jesus you know, before Jesus was even in the world. Why were you talking about Jesus Christ in the Old Testament when Jesus Christ wasn't even born... Way before man. We can't begin to comprehend how long the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ was in this world, you know?

Other participants placed the pre-invasion Jesus spirit firmly within their respective cultural contexts.

Mia showed me a stunning dot painting she had done of the Creation. Present are the Trinity, with their feminine tools (coolamons) and masculine tools (boomerangs), as well as Mary. Describing the painting, Mia explained the figures to me, saying, 'Jesus' spirit was always there from the beginning.'



Figure 5.1: *Jesus at Creation*. By Mia. Author's own image, December 2020.

In the course of this conversation with Mia, I mentioned that many Arrernte people had told me, 'We recognise that Jesus. Different name, same spirit.' Mia emphatically exclaimed, 'Yes! Same spirit', nodding vigorously.

Mrs. Ryder also positioned Jesus' pre-invasion spirit among her Arrernte culture:

I reckon Jesus been here from the Creation, you know? Even though he wasn't born, not at Creation time, but I think Jesus was already here. He would have been walking around among people as spirit, you know [before white people came]. And our old people, you know? In their time, they would have known Jesus. They would have known Jesus, because they would have thoughts, you know, in their head? About someone higher, somewhere.

Mrs. Ryder clearly states that Jesus was present in pre-invasion communities although the implication is that his presence may not have always been explicitly known (this

interpretation is dependent on language; Mrs. Ryder is multi-lingual and her references to ancestors' thoughts may be more specific than they present here).

However, this spirit form of Jesus must be Arrernte, because Mrs. Ryder also states that the spirit people would have acknowledged Jesus. It is typical that people operate within their own cultures, particularly in the extremely complex and culturally-distinct structures existing within pre-invasion communities.

Troy talked about Jesus being present at finite points in history. The following story is explicitly placed by him shortly before missionaries arrived at Wadeye. Like Mrs. Ryder, Troy placed Jesus within his own culture.

In this story, Mary established a healing site before missionaries arrived with their Christianity. It is also interesting to note that Mary is Aboriginal, with dark skin, language, special naming, and the use of song with a prophet figure related to my source, Troy and his people. By inference Jesus as her son would be possessed of these qualities.

We...Aboriginal people already knew Holy Spirit and Jesus. He was here already Jesus, but we didn't know it by the name of Jesus. The people called him the name of *Yile Neki*. *Yile Neki* means 'our father'. That's my great-grandmother's language. *Murrinh-patha*.

They say, Australian and other people say that, they brought the gospel on the boat. But that's not true. Before they came to Australia, well to my region, my great-grandmother's country, this was her story.

The first settlers came there in the 1800s. They came to a place they call *Werntek Nganayi*. That was the old mission of Wadeye. But before they went there, my great-grandfather, my great-grandmother's brother, had a vision of Mother Mary coming. Came to him.

And because my great-grandfather was a bad person with powers with witchcraft... I think Satan, or Lucifer they call him, came. He was already on Earth and manipulated

my people and started teaching them about witchcraft which killed other people. Murdered other people. And he was a very dangerous man before.

He became contact with a lady and used to take a lot of innocent people's lives. And that's ... before the missionaries came in the boat. Father Richard Docherty came to Wadeye, I mean to that place called old mission, *Werntek Nganayi*. Then my great-grandfather had a vision before they arrived. But before that, a lady took him and introduced him to Jesus Himself in that vision. And mother of this man, she said "That's my son Jesus."

And he went up to Heaven, my great-grandfather. And he was still living in the bush, not knowing Christianity yet. Then he went, and then took him back on Earth, after showing him around Heaven and showing him who was Jesus. Then God the Father said "Jesus' Father is not a human being." He told my people. My great-grandfather. God the Father-ka is not a human being like Jesus is. God the Father is hidden. They say *Ngungamanh*. He's behind the Creation, He's like the unseen. He sits in this glory and it's really bright, he said. He hides behind these bright, bright lights, Jesus.

And Mary took my great-grandfather back on Earth and spoke in his language and called him by the name of *Ullambarkidje*. "Ullambarkidje," she said, "I'll give you a song." And *Ullambarkidje* was given that song.²⁷⁶ They say, the gift of tongues, people called it. Well we call it *malgarrin*.²⁷⁷ It's a different sort of songs that only the wisest person that sung those songs and no-one could understand. So he was singing this song, singing about a place in Heaven.

And then my great-grandfather's wife, as Mother Mary was walking on that ground, she was walking with her bare feet and as she was touching the ground, she made that ground all damp and wet as she touched the ground. And to this day if you go there, it's a big pilgrim place for everyone.

But it all began that day and when he had that vision, he lost all of his wisdom of witchcrafting. He just lost it. And the people thought he was going mad. Like what they think of the preachers. And he was talking about this man living up above them and he's saying He's more powerful than anybody. And those Aboriginal people was like [snickers]. I think he was the first preacher in that region. And everyone was saying "What? What is going on with this one?"

Other old people, other old people living in the bush didn't really believe in him. Jesus. Jesus, who's Jesus?" And everyone was a bit scared, you know, of what he was talking, thought he was going mad.

So Our Lady told him. Mother Mary told him after giving him those things...this vision happened at my grandmother's country. *Kurdantiga* it's called. And my mum's big sister told me when that place where before, that place was all smooth. And all the

²⁷⁶ This person is described by *Murrinpatha* teacher Deminhimpuk Francella Bunduck as *Mollinjin*.

²⁷⁷ Dr John Mansfield at the University of Melbourne describes *mulgarrin* as songs about how the *Murrinpatha* people found Jesus (email exchange, 17 September 2019).

kids of that country knew. The people who were still living in the bush knew that this area was very sacred. That's where Mother Mary walked and my great-grandfather had a vision there. So no-one was allowed to climb on top of that thing cause it was sacred.

This was before the Europeans came. So then the Europeans came, this was Father Richard Docherty. And one of the local boys that was in Darwin, and that was showing the way towards this country, to meet up with the people. No-one was expecting these missionaries to come. But they came.

I think it was all following a plan by Jesus to put those missionaries, make those plans for them. They went to the right place where my great-grandfather was, and all the other people. And then they said to them, they arrived there. And those people didn't really believe that this old, crazy old man going on, they didn't know who this old man talking about; which lady he seen. And then they seen that boat coming. Then they were carrying that statue of the Lady of the Sacred Heart too, those Jesuit priests.

My great-grandfather didn't see white people before in his life. Never met those people. But when my great-grandfather met Mother Mary, he said she was bit darker. She was dark-skinned. She was a dark-skinned lady that came and spoke our language to my great-grandfather. Mother Mary.

While the story is primarily a Marian one, it contextualises the placement of Jesus within the Catholic missionary history of the region.

We...Aboriginal people already knew Holy Spirit and Jesus. He was here already Jesus, but we didn't know it by the name of Jesus. The people called him the name of *Yile Neki*. *Yile Neki* means 'our father'. That's my great-grandmother's language. *Murrinh-patha*.

I asked if he recognised Jesus as the same as this one (Aboriginal).

Yeah, *Yile Neki*. And Jesus... I mean my great-great-grandfather recognised Jesus as *Ngathan*. *Ngathan* means brother. He recognised that man-that spirit...and Jesus. My great-grandfather, before European missionaries came to that region.

And my great-grandfather said, "See! I told you mob!" he said to his own people. "Ah, you mob think I was going mad. But see that lady those spirit people (they called them) are carrying? That's the lady I already met. And that man they're carrying, on the cross there, that wooden thing? I met those two, but I met this lady here, *kawu neki*, that's the *kawu neki* I was talking about. That's Our Mother I was talking about. That's the Mother I was talking about," he was saying to those people.

And ever since then, that place, it became a healing place then.

It wasn't a healing place before. That place was a healing place because of Mother Mary. Before the Europeans came, they had that place before they came. And they arrived. And then they told them, they told the missionaries that that place is the place of, that's the lady who appeared to us. And they have the statue there of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart today if you go there.

Troy's story about his grandfather meeting Jesus is described by Troy as taking place when his grandfather was 'not knowing Christianity yet.' However continuing my assumption that communities tend to see figures within their own context unless stated otherwise, I infer that Troy's grandfather encountered an Aboriginal Jesus (strength is added to this argument by Troy's detail that Jesus' mother was black and spoke language). Troy distinguishes between introduced Christianity and his relationship with an established Jesus, *Yile Neki*. This distinction between existing and introduced relationships with Jesus will also be articulated by P in a subsequent section.

Troy's story places the spirits of Mary and Jesus in an Aboriginal cultural context to warn people of an approaching mission, whereupon the Western forms of these global entities appeared, but were recognised by Troy's people as the same entities, bridging the cultures. This story is renowned among Troy's community and has been published in Murrinhpatha language.

(Removed due to copyright restriction.)

Figure 5.2: *Murrinha Nanthi Malkarrin* (The gospel song story). Gregory Mollingin Panpawa, Wadeye: Wadeye Press, 1981, p7.

Deane-Drummond observes:

The true humanity of Christ is reflected in his finiteness, participation in the history of the cosmos in the dimension of spirit and of freedom, as well as in the history that leads ultimately to death.²⁷⁸

This observation of Deane-Drummond's is echoed in several of the upcoming Arrernte stories, where Jesus' spirit is active in their communities (at no discount to their faith in his earthly life in Palestine). It also resonates with Troy's story. Jesus engages with Troy's community-not in isolation, but with his family, as would be understood by such a socially-structured community. Jesus shows his humanity through his kinship with his mother in this story, but also his place as a cosmic being and arbiter of events to come.

This story also incorporates another famous image that Rahner presented. He wrote of light as a metaphor for God's presence in our lives, helping to illuminate the infinite.²⁷⁹ Troy talks about Jesus sitting behind bright lights. The late Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance, professor of dogmatic theology in Edinburgh, wrote:

By His very mode of being as Spirit He hides Himself from us so that we do not know Him directly in His own hypostasis, and in His mode of activity as transparent Light He effaces Himself that the one Triune God may shine through Him to us.²⁸⁰

Despite huge distance in location and culture, both descriptions highlight mystery, humility, and mode of operation within the Trinity; all things with which Rahner's commentary can be tied to participant material.

²⁷⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 42.

²⁷⁹ McCool, *Rahner Reader*, 113.

²⁸⁰ Thomas Torrance, *God and rationality* (Oxford University Press: London, 1971), 167.

Other participants will refer back to Jesus' persona as the light of the world, continuing this universal metaphor.

P positions Jesus' eternal presence on this continent in both Biblical and cultural terms (expanding on the latter next section).

In terms of his presence, [Jesus has been here] since the beginning of time. ...Remember in Genesis it talks about God walking through the Garden? We believe that that was Jesus himself. If Jesus is God, and God is Jesus-well, it's all one and the same.

However...the inculturation-or even the incarnation of Jesus-He was born a long time before He was *born* born. In terms of he was born from the beginning, right?

P talking about Jesus placed as walking in the garden could be foreshadowing the future incarnations P is to describe, where Jesus constantly moves among communities. It is reminiscent of the conclusion drawn at Chalcedon, that Jesus is consubstantial with us in his humanity (or as Edwards phrases it, '[Jesus] too is made of stardust.').²⁸¹

In yarning about Jesus' presence on this continent since the beginning of time, and the nature of that presence, I asked P if he was familiar with stories about Jesus being represented as an animal in a pre-invasion context.

Yep. Yep. Yes absolutely. So the word in our language *Kurrunpa Milmilypa* is the word for Holy Spirit or the Spirit that guides. *Kurrunpa* being the spirit of the people, *Milmilypa* being the leader, being the guide. And being sacred as well. In terms of animal stories, there's a number of them. There's a willy wagtail; a story that talks about the joy and the happiness that the Holy Spirit brings, and there's a dance that goes with that. Obviously there's dance, there's song, there's ceremony connected to all of these elements. . . Jesus can manifest as that spirit.

²⁸¹ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 81.

We would argue that he's always been. And that the stories that we have in our culture is that those footprints, we have footprints of God walking beside us. Story songs, and God walking beside us in the sand with us.

Recognition of the attributes of the cosmic Christ articulated by Rahner, Deane-Drummond, and Edwards permeates these descriptions. We share a Jesus who was 'walking around in spirit' since the beginning; Mrs. Ryder's Jesus Christ is physically connected to Creation even in spirit, walking around on Country. This resonates with Deane-Drummond and Edwards, who see Jesus Christ as so intrinsically a part of Creation and embedded in evolution.

Claire's statement, 'Jesus is always part of *Altyerre*' also connects to the universal, or cosmic Christ. Christ is embedded in Creation since time began. This eternal Christ is also evident in Mia's perspective, as well as her acknowledgement of the earthly incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth: '*Ngkarte Kweke* man came along...'. Jesus' dual nature, as well as omnipotent presence, is evident in Claire's worldview.

After we discussed stories about animals as holy messengers, P distinguished for me the difference between animals of spiritual importance and God, saying that white people misunderstood Aboriginal spirituality:

The rainbow serpent and all this crap that people carry on about; the rainbow serpent's not the Creator. The spirit of the kangaroo's not the Creator. And this is where you'll go across countries and you'll see different names for a Creation spirit. Ours is *Altjirre Kurrunpa* -the source of all and our most powerful Creator.

Elements of Wisdom characteristics also begin to appear in this discussion. As Deane-Drummond points out, the variety of New Testament Christologies, including a variety of

meanings for Wisdom incarnate, needs to be respected.²⁸² It is not within the scope of this thesis to argue for the development and expression of all these, but to address the general characteristics of Jesus as Wisdom incarnate as recognised by Deane-Drummond.

In the above story, Troy describes how Jesus takes his name among the community and creates kinship bonds, reminiscent of Sophia coming among the people and making a place there. This theme will be developed in the next sections.

Jesus and the Trinity

Each participant, like Rahner, Deane-Drummond and Edwards, pointed to Jesus' position within the Trinity as the nature of his presence at Creation and throughout eternity. As the Trinity has been present everywhere since the beginning of time, it follows that Jesus has been in this land, since Creation, as part of that dynamic.

All participants expressed faith in some form of Trinitarian concept. It is therefore appropriate to examine understandings of the cosmic Christ's longevity in this land.

Mrs. Ryder commented:

“[before white people came]...in our way, *Ngardaknya* God the Father, *Ngkarte* Jesus. *Utnenge Ngkarte* Holy Spirit.”

Troy believes in the pre-colonial Trinitarian existence here and relationship with community:

²⁸² Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 102.

We are the oldest people, actually, on the Earth...I believe that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were here, and created us on Earth as a caretaker... we Aboriginal people already knew Holy Spirit and Jesus.

Some participants demonstrated Aboriginal understanding meeting Christian thinking, by making automatic connections to introduced gospel with Biblical references to Genesis and John. Others, however, talked about Jesus' pre-invasion presence here through the Trinity through their cultural lens.

Emma related a pre-invasion Trinitarian story from her Adnyamathanha nation, placing Jesus as a prophet and law-giver well before the arrival of white missionaries. Like Troy's story, and agreeing with Rahner's perspective of Jesus of Nazareth as a temporally-finite and final revelation, it places Jesus as appearing at a fixed point in history. We see not only the appearance of Jesus within the Trinity as prophesier, but the physical evidence these participants ascribe to the involvement of the Trinity and an argument to white newcomers about the veracity of their sacred stories and familiarity with the Trinity.

God has always been a Triune God from the start. You know there's the Father God, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For Adnyamathanha people, we've had what they would call a Dreamtime story, but this story has been passed down for years before colonisation, and when the missionaries came to our people, the Adnyamathanha people in the far north Flinders Ranges, they were shocked that we had a story of three men that used to come and visit us and we have about four or five different stories and all of those four or five different stories are massive turning points within the Bible.

So we have those three men came (names in language) and the translations of their names are the Father, the Son, and the Spirit... so they used to come. The Son would speak and the Father would stand and the Spirit would be there...so those three men used to come and they told them that they had to get ready because there was a big flood coming.

Nobody believed (the Adnyamathanha people) and then archaeologists started to find all the fossils of fish and stuff that had been all along the Flinders... and they said...how did that happen? And they said those three men came along and told us.

...that's why when they came and they tried to tell us about Jesus, they were saying Oh yeah we know him! And they were saying No, no, you don't know him, we're trying to teach you about him. And they said no no, we do! ...Those were holy beings, those three men. (And they were) very much the same in terms of status and power. (They are) very much the same, but there's one that doesn't speak. And that must be the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally, the flood story transcends parallelism with the Bible, as geological evidence backs up the Adnyamathanha claim of an ancient great interior sea.²⁸³ The story also calls to mind the way Luke's gospel tells us the Spirit appeared bodily (Luke 3:22). Rahner, reminds we Catholics that of the three divine Persons, only the Logos became human.²⁸⁴

Mrs. Ryder, when explaining Jesus' eternal presence in her Country, embedded him within the Trinity. She clearly articulates that the Trinity is expressed according to her cultural norm:

In our way, *Ngardaknya* God the Father, *Ngkarte* Jesus, *Utnenge Ngkarte* Holy Spirit. God is *Utnenge*. God *Utnenge*, *Ngkarte Merra Ngardaknya*. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In *our* way. *Arrernte* way.

Claire was also clear on Jesus' place in the Trinity, and in her placement of him in her Arrernte culture, by designation of Jesus in *Altyerre*:

²⁸³ Australian Government: Director of National Parks, *The Flinders Ranges: where ancient landscapes inspire and reveal the story of life* (2020), [www.ecotourism.org.au > assets > flinders-ranges](http://www.ecotourism.org.au/assets/flinders-ranges).

²⁸⁴ Ackley, *Church of the Word*, 38.

You know *Altyerre*? *Altyerre* is the Dreaming, and *Altyerre* made everything. There's an *Altyerre* Dreaming, you know? *Utnenge* has been there all the time. *Utnenge* is God's Spirit. Jesus is God the Father and Son. (He's been around) a long time. *Ngkarte* God the Father was here for a long time since the beginning, hey?

Altyerre- one God the Father is *Altyerre*. *Ngkarte Kweke* Man came along. *Ngkarte Kweke* Man is Jesus... He was from the beginning. Jesus is always part of *Altyerre*. (All three were here on this country from the beginning)...and still here now.

Ngkarte Kweke Man, or sometimes called *Ngarte Kweke* or just *Kweke* Man, alternatively described to me as meaning 'little God' or 'God's little brother' is Jesus represented with an alternative kinship tie appropriate to the culture. This was expressed to me by Claire, P, and several other people of nearby communities in casual discussion.

Mia articulated a difference between Jesus the Palestinian man, and his spirit among the Arrernte people from the beginning:

Ngkarte was always there. *Ngkarte Utnenge* was with them from the very start. Jesus just came lately. (*Ngkarte* has been in this country) since the Creation. Jesus' spirit was ... always there from the beginning. (*Ngkarte* and *Ngkarte Utnenge* ... and the Spirit of Jesus were) all together. All together from the beginning. Three. Like the Trinity. Three in one. Three in one.

Mia's syntactic structure around the cosmic Christ is interesting; she describes *Ngkarte*, *Ngkarte Utnenge*, and the spirit of Jesus as being three, *like* the Trinity. This ties into P's understandings around the Trinity being an introduced description that is akin to previously-existing Aboriginal structures.

P sees the Trinity as a concept that is fully comprehended by his communities, if not organic to those communities.

For P, the elements of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally present in the Aboriginal worldview, but expressed differently in that worldview. He explained this concept while talking about *Ngunkarri*, traditional healers. He explained that all spiritual beings are connected, and their unity can be compared with the white Trinity. P provided examples of how Trinitarian concepts look in the Pintupi-Luritja-Arrernte cultures:

See *Ngunkarri*, the traditional healers? They use the spiritual powers or the spiritual strengths of *Ngkarte* to create balms and medicines and prayers. Well we wouldn't call them prayers, that's a whitefulla word, word that whitefullas brought. But songs that are essentially songs of healing, and the *Ngunkarri*, they're the ones who are positioned then as the witchdoctors.

But the *Ngunkarri* is now the modern doctor. The modern source of medicine, and the healing that comes from church by the laying on of hands, or prayer that comes through the church processes. Or you know, whatever the liturgies, or the Church rather than going back to the *Ngunkarri* there with the men and women traditional healers, traditional spiritual healers. So they played the practical role. In many ways sort of the messenger.

If you look at it three ways – I'm not sure if you've got this, but *Altyerre* in Arrernte language is the Father, the Creator spirit. Jesus Christ is the *Ngkarte*, the messenger of that. And the physical being or the physical image. And the *Kurrunpa Milmilypa*, the Holy Spirit, is the third layer below, which is ... *Ngunkarri*.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ A discrepancy in Arrernte vocabulary can be noted between some members of different Arrernte communities. This may be attributed to diversity of language among different groups or second-, third- and fourth-language facility and my ineptitude at clarifying this correctly. Any faults are entirely my own and have no bearing on the generous expert help I was given by a range of Eastern and Western Arrernte first-language speakers. Another type of indication of the breadth of sophistication and complexity of the language can be found in the writing of Arrernte artist and educator Margaret Kemarre Turner, OAM:

So that's the three ways of *altyerre*. There's *Altyerre* means the way that the Traditional Story travelled, then there's *Altyerre* that means any dream you might have when you're sleeping, and there's also *Altyerre* means your mother's father's Land Story.

Margaret Kemarre Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye: what it means to be an Aboriginal person* (IAD Press: Alice Springs, 2010), 50. Mrs Turner also explained this to me in person in Alice Springs, 2018.

The mention of 'the layer below' made me question any subordination, or if this was a Trinitarian structure. P clarified that this is a pre-existing concept that can be compared to the Trinity. The ideas work together, but the mistake is not to be made that these are introduced doctrines:

The only reason it's seen as a Trinitarian thing is because that's the way we've tried to then explain our cultural value system and then bring connections to the Christian values that have been placed upon us...It was a way of sort of explaining that we had systems in place that reflected God, or reflected the relationship of the Father – or again, there's no word for us for father or mother, it's the same.

Yeah, so the only way that I can explain it so that you can understand it, is that that's our way of kind of explaining that we have an understanding of the Trinity, we have an understanding of the Spirit of God, that creates, that holds, that binds everything together, that's universal, that is all-knowing, all-being, you know, omnipresence and so on and so forth. Though we have a symbol and an image for the role of Jesus Christ, we also have a role for the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit which is the *Kurrunpa Milmilypa*...and the *Ngkarte*.

This reference to an omnipotent being that binds everything together, and Claire's reference to God in everything, echoes the fundamental unity in all created things from which Rahner begins his reflections.²⁸⁶

Returning to P, clarification was sought around whether this meant that Aboriginal cultures can accommodate Christianity rather than the other way around:

Not accommodate, but certainly complement, certainly work in unison with. But those systems and structures were never drawn upon at the time of the establishment of the Church today. So in many ways, what we say is "Hey, the Church was already here." It just didn't look like the way that the Church wants it.

...you'll go across countries and you'll see different names for a Creation spirit. Ours is *Altyerre*. That is the all-encompassing, all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent spirit

²⁸⁶ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 105.

of God which encompasses the spirit of Christ, or Jesus, you know, that's in that. The Holy Spirit's part of that as well.

P's description of the Trinitarian issues above clearly place Jesus in this country at the beginning of time, functioning within his cultures independently of white influence.

Edwards reminds us that the word 'Trinity' was not used until the late second century, although the experiences of the early Christian communities were already Trinitarian.²⁸⁷ P is speaking from cultures currently dated from 80,000 years, which have articulated Trinitarian concepts millennia before Jesus' Nazarene ministry.

Finally, Adnyamathanha woman Rhaneer also confirmed the Trinity on country and, like P, articulated an explicit difference in recognition:

...if we're saying that Jesus is in the Trinity; God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then the spirit's always been in this land. Since Creation. Since the beginning of Creation, definitely, the spirit that lives in God, and lives in Jesus, was definitely here from the start. We've always known about the spirit, that's for sure. Maybe we just had a different name for it. Maybe we just had a different image, a different idea of what it was and how it worked in our lives.

For Rahner,

Grace...is the actual dwelling of the three Persons of the economical Trinity within the justified soul. Historical man comes from the Trinity, lives a supernatural life which relates him personally to each of the Persons of the Trinity, and is ordered to eternal personal union with the Trinity as his beatifying goal. Far from being a metaphysical abstraction the Trinity is the mystery of ... personal salvation.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith: the change of heart that leads to a new way of living on Earth* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 66.

²⁸⁸ Karl Rahner, "The Triune God" in *Rahner reader*, ed. McCool, 132.

The preceding participants place the Trinity in the Land, in themselves, and in sacred figures, such as Emma's and Emori's three figures who came to give the law, indicating a personal relationship between the communities and the Trinity. This also accords with Rahner's Imminent Trinity, providing non-Aboriginal Catholics with a space in which to recognise this same Jesus spirit at the beginning of time. P has demonstrated how the Trinity works within his culture on a personal and contemporary as well as historical level, and how people personally relate to the persons of the Trinity.

To return to Palawa theologian Skye, her research similarly indicated that the women she interviewed for her research believed God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit had been working together, doing everything together, since before Christianity came.²⁸⁹ For this reason, and the Aboriginal view of these three elements working with the Land since Creation, Skye agrees with P in that white Trinitarian concepts cannot be neatly aligned with Aboriginal beliefs, but they can be accommodated. The elements remain the same, but understanding of their activity is different.

...a model of Australian Indigenous Christian women's Trinitarian theology cannot be structured. The only similarities they share with the White Western Christian Trinitarian theology is the understanding of the three individual persons or spirits of the Godhead, the individual hypostasis understanding of the Trinity being part of traditional Trinitarian thinking.²⁹⁰

Skye maintains that her data proves an emphasis between God and nature, not the naming of the Trinitarian components, so her informants would agree with a range of

²⁸⁹ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 156-157.

²⁹⁰ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 157.

interpretations including Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This issue does not take precedence.²⁹¹

The Holy Spirit ... is not, however, an object of intellectual/cerebral study; it is a spiritual experience. It is an experience of 'living spirit/energy', the 'pulse and breath of life', that is intimately connected to the Land, as they are connected to the Land, and lives and moves through all Creation.²⁹²

The connection with the ecotheology of Deane-Drummond and Edwards is obvious, allowing non-Aboriginal Catholics not the understanding of Aboriginal Christians, but an understanding of the differences in our perceptions of the Trinity to be respected, and the shared vision of all three persons of the Trinity intrinsically present in, and experienced through, Creation.

Perceptions of time

When discussing the length of presence here of a cosmic Christ, it is appropriate to briefly mention different time systems between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Buckskin describes time as circular, but with finite points of history on the wheel from which people can move in and out from ethereal realms. This concurs with the finite points in the stories above, but also maintains distinction from western temporal perception.

Randall writes,

²⁹¹ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 157.

²⁹² Skye, *Yiming calling*, 157-158.

When we think about time, it is only the now, the present, that is important. In each and every moment of 'now-ness' is where we live out the truth of the connectedness of *kanyini* [connectedness and responsibility]...The Creation period is not something that just existed in the past. To us it is also part of the present and will continue to exist in the future.²⁹³

This approach is one that clarifies for non-Aboriginal listeners the lack of paradox for Aboriginal people in seeing Jesus as incarnating throughout (Western, linear views of) time.

P also sees time as non-linear, so Jesus has not only been here from the beginning of time but is constantly here in human guise. When asked if time works differently between cultures, P was adamant:

Oh yeah. Course it does. Circular. We live in eternity right now.

This will impact on several of his personal references to Jesus' activity and seeing them as current.

Uniting Church minister Bernard Clarke writes about time being circular, something he learned from many years in community. He writes that time for the Yolngu people is non-linear, and in ceremony, the special time when animals and people interacted to mediate law comes into the present.²⁹⁴

Pattel-Gray describes this phenomenon:

Looking at the 'Dreaming' is the best way to comprehend Australian Indigenous consciousness, even though it is a patronising, White Western term given to describe

²⁹³ Randall, *Songman*, 17.

²⁹⁴ Clarke, *Larrpan ga buduyurr*, 16.

that consciousness....Australian Aboriginal time is 'no-time', it does not have triunal division of past, present and future as described in the white Western concept of time. Thus, it is not lineal.²⁹⁵

Skye concurs and further presents damage done by this culturally-exclusive, or racist, approach.

Ignorance is definitely a problem, born out of imperialistic, hegemonic ontology affecting...Australian Indigenous...Peoples. (They) have ontology that is more spiritually-centred than White Western ontology, thus producing atemporal concepts of time, the antithesis of the White Western time-structure. The devastating reality is that such ignorance, or rather, racist apathy, in relation to racial ontology and epistemology, is at the foundation of the misery of Australian Aboriginal...Peoples.²⁹⁶

While Rahner is committed to a revelation fixed in historical time, the cross event, he does see Creation as ongoing, much like the *munaitya* (Dreaming) of many Aboriginal cultures examined so far.

In the first instance, then, Creation and creatureliness do not mean a momentary event, namely, the first moment of a temporal existence, but mean the establishing of this existent and his/her time itself, and this establishing does not enter into time, but is the ground of time...Creation means an ongoing and always actual process for which every existent is taking place now just as much as at an earlier point of time.²⁹⁷

For Rahner, Creation is continuous. (Edwards also acknowledges ongoing Creation.²⁹⁸) As seen, many participants linked Jesus inextricably with Creation through *munaitya*, Trinity and the Spirit; he is part of the land and thus Creation eternally. The nature of Jesus' eternal

²⁹⁵ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 83-84.

²⁹⁶ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 84.

²⁹⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith, an introduction to the idea of Christianity* (US: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 77.

²⁹⁸ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 21.

spirit in Creation can be discerned through this quote of Rahner's read together with the statements in the project about Jesus' location with the Creator from the beginning.

Like P, Rahner's outlook on time does not follow a linear path, although the nature of each position differs. Rahner does not see time continuing after death unchanged, but time is subsumed into a reality that is eternity. History will end when human fulfilment is reached.²⁹⁹

Edwards agrees with Rahner, and clarifies that future life is to be understood as 'a fulfilment of both space (in the new Earth) and time) in eternity together. The fulfilment of time is also the fulfilment of space.'³⁰⁰ In each position, despite the non-Aboriginal perspectives having a clear eschatological background, a sense of change and purpose can be discerned in ethereal time.

Buckskin says, 'there's a circle of life in ourselves. So time to us is nothing because we know that we're specks. We're only coming and going.'³⁰¹ P described during this project that after death, he will return to his ancestors who follow him, to in turn follow his descendants.

It appears that from P and Buckskin, the resolution of time and space already exists on the eternal circle. Humanity abides by cultural norms, but there appears to be a lack of the

²⁹⁹ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 113.

³⁰⁰ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 114.

³⁰¹ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, 1 July, 2020

eschatological aspect of western Christology. Participant Rhanee, in a personal conversation at another time, concurred with these ideas, adding that “time is one continuous moment to God.”³⁰²

Moving forward

It is clear from the participants’ material that the spirit of Jesus, described both independently and within a Trinitarian structure, is recognised as present pre-invasion. I now turn to exploring the distinction between Jesus and other spirits present in cultures across the dingo songline.

³⁰² Rhanee Lester, interview with author, 22 August, 2020

CHAPTER SIX: Christ with the people

This... is what we feel-that our Spirituality is life-minded.³⁰³

Cynthia Rowan

Birra Gubba Catholic woman

As spiritual theologians [Aboriginal women] present a Christianity that is influenced by their ontology, a Christianity that is transformed and becomes more in harmony with and constructive towards Creation...³⁰⁴

Lee Miena Skye

Palawa Catholic woman

In the first part of this chapter I will listen to participant wisdom around the nature of Jesus by viewing him in comparison with other spirit people. Spirit people, in varying formats, constitute a huge role in Aboriginal societies.

I adopt the phrase *spirit people* here as the most commonly used and accepted word given to me by participants. It also applies to those figures such as serpent and bird because those animals were at one time people, or can become people.

In describing Jesus as distinct from spirit people, several participants independently made the distinction that Jesus was not only different from these beings, but higher than them.

³⁰³ Cynthia Rowan, "Aboriginal spirituality: a sense of belonging" in *Aboriginal spirituality*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, 15.

³⁰⁴ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 7.

Most participants used hand gestures to indicate levels so I am interpreting and using words on which they have agreed.

The second part of the chapter discusses some of the roles Jesus appears to play among the people with whom I yarned, and compares them to the way in which non-Aboriginal people view these roles.

Jesus is distinct from other spiritual beings

In Chapter Five Emma and Emori told a story about (Trinitarian) men.³⁰⁵ They used their fluency in Adnyamathanha to explain the implications of language used when discussing whether or not Jesus is distinct from other spiritual beings. I asked if those (Trinitarian) men from their story were considered by Emma and Emori to be ancestral heroes in the way that some Aboriginal people look at creative spirits in the traditional sense, or would they be separate? Their conversation follows, and includes an interesting explanation for why they believe their Trinitarian story to be recount rather than sacred story:

Emma: I think they'd be separate. The way that the old fullas talk about them is separate.

Emo: Separate. It's not like they would talk about others.

Emma: It's not like they would talk about the *Akurra*, the serpent. The Creation serpent, that's our thing. They talk about them like they're very different, and they're very powerful...

Emori: They talk about *Akurra*, the rainbow serpent, but they would not even tell you that, it's not even part of the Dreamtime.

³⁰⁵ This appears on page 139.

Emma: Yeah, it's a story that happened. If they talk about the *Akurra*, they'd say, "And then he came here, this is where we say that he slept."

When they speak in Adnyamathanha they don't say this is where we say he slept, they say this is where those three men stood. And they said this. They declared it. They didn't just say it, they declared it. The language that they use is as if it was past. It's a story that happened. They're recounting.

They make it sound totally separate. For us, we have different words for them to describe them. Because like I was saying our Creation stories are nothing like anyone else's.

So it's pretty much separate, you knew that those were holy beings, those three men. They weren't some other story that went along, like it had nothing to do with animals. Most of our Creation stories have things to do with animals or an angry family. These are just totally separate, and these beings never change. They have been the same, that's what they do, in all the stories.

(*Akurra*) is like the ultimate being. It was polar opposite to those three men and that's why everybody in our culture says those three men were different from this.

Those three men aren't from earth. Those three men that they talk about. The *Akurra* is from earth so it's restricted to this land.

I asked Emma to clarify if the men came to instruct in the law.

Yes. They came to warn and come and tell people what the right way was. People would listen to those three men, but there was still under that banner of the *Akurra*. They would still follow, and keep those places to keep the *Akurra* happy. But they would listen to those three men when the three men came because they know those three men were the more powerful beings.

Emma's reference to recounting made me think of Troy's story about the visitation of Father, Jesus and Mary. Troy was explicit when stating that the story happened before invasion. He positions the events in relation to the arrival of the missionaries, lending the narrative an air of recount. This resonates with Emma's description of the Adnyamathanha

language used to describe the three men of the Trinity; it is the language used to declare an historical event, not symbolic. These are fixed historical events for these Christians.

I next asked about Jesus' place on Country.

It's everywhere. And I think that was part of God's way of saying I can be anywhere and everywhere. Don't restrict me to a place because when he tore the veil when Jesus rose from the dead, after He died on the cross and He tore the veil, that was His way of saying, you can come straight to me.

So if He kept appearing in one spot, that's why Aboriginal people are like, why do we got to go to a church? God wasn't in the church, He's just in the backyard, you know. On that hill over there. So ... I can see how that would have been a hard thing for them to understand, why they had to go to a certain meeting place to meet God. Because you're going back to Jewish law. If you're making us meet in a congregation, and saying that that's where you go to feel at peace with God, then we're going back. We're restricting God.

So that's why I can understand, for Aboriginal people, it would have been a lot for them to go, why do you keep putting me inside four walls? I know where God is. He's out there. And that's what you hear a lot of them fullas say. That's why you feel, like you said yourself, when you go out to country and you feel the wind, and you feel Him in this and that; that's where you're supposed to feel Him. You're supposed to feel Him everywhere, not just inside a church.

Emma then explained that *Akurra* has special places on country, and that those places are the most sacred places for her community. It was interesting to note that Jesus does not have a specific place on Country, but the other creative spirit *Akurra* does. Jesus is seen as having a creative role with God at the beginning of Creation, with *Akurra* coming afterwards and finishing off Creation of the landscape (as Emma describes below).

I hear this as another inference that Jesus transcends spirit beings, and is also being firmly positioned as the cosmic Christ, embedded in Creation. This is notwithstanding the fact that

Emma, like Rahner, acknowledges Jesus of Nazareth as a finite historical event that altered the way in which God and humanity engaged with each other.

Emma's perspective of Jesus as not having one particular place, but being 'everywhere', embedded in all of nature, will be confirmed by Mia, P, and other participants, as does former Catholic priest and current senator, Yawuru man Patrick Dodson; 'The land is full of the spirits, thoughts and deeds of the creative forces.'³⁰⁶ Pattel-Gray refers to this when she writes of Aboriginal people's connection to spirituality through land rather than limiting themselves to buildings and liturgies the way non-Aboriginal Christians do.³⁰⁷ This idea of limiting God's omnipotent power will be echoed by Emma in further discussion.

Emori and Emma then speak of the tension between the spirit beings, and subsequent implications for their Christianity. Jesus takes an active role in directing Creation:

Emori: I was going to say before, *Akurra* was creating, in Adnyamathanha way we say he was creating the whole world, the landscape and everything about the world. And them three fullas was just telling them what they need to do. He created all this stuff...

Emma: from something that was already created.

Emori: and he's trying to distract you but then people let them three fullas they're still trying to tell you what's going to happen.

Emma: They're still speaking prophecy. And yet everybody's still focussed on this *Akurra*, this serpent that's going through and doing stuff.

Emori: And he's got a resting place that's on earth.

³⁰⁶ Patrick Dodson, "The land our mother, the church our mother" in *Discovering an Australian theology*, ed. Peter Malone (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1998), 83.

³⁰⁷ Pattel-Gray, *Ochre Spirits*, 50.

Emma: Those three men aren't from earth. Those three men that they talk about. The *Akurra* is from earth so it's restricted to this land... and that's where it's said the *Akurra* dwells; inside the land.

Emori: Yeah, inside.

A recurring distinction between the three men and the serpent is that the serpent is land-bound, while the three men, therefore Jesus, are transcendent.

Emma had previously explained that the *Akurra* is the ultimate being on earth, with no other ancestral spirits or creative beings, so I asked if *Akurra* is a primary Creator superseding God on Country.

Emma: No, if you talk to other Adnyamathanha people, they will talk about it in quite a high regard, the *Akurra*. Especially people who are very against Christianity. They will speak of him very highly. But if you listen to the stories and you listen to it from the translations of the Elders, and we've been studying Adnyamathanha since we were little, we were taught our language. And we did it linguistically. So when you actually take it apart, and you look at it linguistically, the use of the language, the world was already formed. The *Akurra* when it came in, it came and...

Emori: Carved out the landscape.

Emma: So there was already things here for him to come through and slide his body up against to make the ranges and everything like that. Or say there are some wells that he vomited out, that's called *Akurra* *place name in language*, that's sacred waterhole. And stuff like that. But he didn't form the whole world. He only created parts of the land.

And that's why I think that Adnyamathanhas haven't really focussed in on that story much to know hey, well who created that land that he gouged through? And who created him? And that's where Christianity fills in the blanks. You know, like God created that world. And maybe there was a big serpent who came through and carved out those ranges, but God was there. From the beginning.

I then asked if *Akurra* would have been created by God.

Emma: By God, yeah.

For Emma and Emori, God created everything, with facilitation from the other Persons of the Trinity; they even directed the Adnyamathanha creative spirit *Akurra*. By looking at the two traditions of Western Christianity and Adnyamathanha sacred story and 'filling in the blanks', the siblings perceive a world where extra-terrestrial spiritual Trinitarian beings and local, creative beings that belong to the earth, work together. The resulting Creation bears hallmarks of both and God is felt in all, throughout nature, not necessarily in a constructed building that fails to harness the fullness of spiritual creativity.

Claire, too, maintains that Jesus is a different entity from the ancestral spirit people of her nation, and she describes his special relationship with people. From this conversation, it is not entirely clear whether she believes Jesus and spirit people to have their origins in Creation concurrently, but she certainly places the spirit people before humanity; akin to Jesus but not the same.

Jesus is still always with us. Different from the spirit people. When you like pray for him to come, but we know praying, he answers all our prayers, hey? And he's here with us all that time. He's here standing with us as we talk here. Jesus is always part of *Altyerre*. [confirms this in language with another woman]

The ancestors...well I think God made them before us Aboriginal people. When you go out bush, to a country that's not disturbed by people, you can hear voices. And you can hear people singing. They spirit people.

Resonating with Deane-Drummond's perspective that Christ is present in all biological life, Mia feels that Jesus is in everything, including the spirit people.³⁰⁸

Jesus is part of the spirits of the land. The same, yep. (Jesus is) everywhere. Not only in this country but everywhere. In all Creation. Plants and everything too. Even in the spirit people. In everything. And even in the traditional healer. The traditional healer from the spirit people. And from Jesus. All in one within traditional healers.

[When I am doing healing] Ngkarte Utnege is in me... and the spirit people. The healing comes from Ngkarte Utnege and the spirit people. Together. Working.

Mrs. Ryder was also very definite about Jesus' distinction, and his universal presence.

[Jesus is] Different. 'Cause he's special, he's different from those other spirit people. The spirit people would look at him as someone higher up from them you know? Yeah. You can find Jesus anywhere.

Like Mrs. Ryder, Troy sees Jesus as the font of knowledge and linked to Country, but on a higher level than spirit people, whom he likened to angels:

Yeah it's like angels. But special angels that were given to us from God as a gift. Like Jesus gives a lot of people gifts. Like he gave people-like say for instance- Saint Francis of Assisi. God gave him the gift of animals; that he communicated with animals.

But Aboriginal people have the same thing. He gave us the gift of nature, connecting to land. We can connect to land better than anyone. We connect to the spirits of the land. God gave us the gifts of the animals that roam this earth.

³⁰⁸ It should be noted that some nations, such as the Kurna peoples, view all of nature as sentient, not just biological. For example, Jack Buckskin has the rock as his totem. He cares for them and acknowledges them as much as people or trees, stating that everything in nature has its place and possesses elements of spirituality. (Jack Buckskin, interview with author, 27 April 2020).

Troy also affirmed that Jesus is not like one of the ancestral creative beings; that he is 'higher up.' He is connecting to Skye's observation that for Aboriginal peoples, the land is sacred, with "the spirits" to be found there.

Rhaneë was also asked to comment on whether Jesus is an ancestral or creative spirit.

Yes, I think definitely, because he's the three-in-one. So the Spirit that's within him is the Spirit that created and breathed life into us.

However when asked if *Akurra* and Jesus were on the same level, or are different in nature altogether, Rhaneë had a different answer from other Adnyamathanha interviewees.

I would see it as the same. Only because when I think of the Spirit, it moves, and is between everything as well.

For Rhaneë, the Spirit creates and binds everything, and it appears that there is no distinction across cultures when it comes to creative spirits; *Akurra*/Jesus.

P shares the other participants' belief that Jesus is with the spirit people but distinct from them:

Jesus and spirit people are two different things. Spirit people are messengers, spirit people are prophets, spirit people are mediators, spirit people are what the church would call prayer warriors. But we don't call them prayer warriors, we call them singers. *Warranjabu. Warranjabu.* They're the singers; they're the spiritual singers.

They're the ones who pray in language and sing songs on country and mediate and communicate. And they're the ones who wail as well, for sorry ceremony. Jesus himself, the spirit of the Creator, incarnate as *Tjookabujera* was-is-was and is-the spirit of the Creator. And that's the distinction of the layering of the Creator, the

Creation, and then the totems and then the ceremonies that then come as a result of that. So there's different layering that is a response to that. And the spirit people are a part of the Creation. The people. The custodians. Part of the Creation. Yeah because the Creator comes first, always has come first.

The Creator created Creation; part of Creation is the people. And the earth and land, the sea, the sky. Part of that Creation are the spirit people. And they're the little people as well, we call them.

Again we see the explicit placement of Jesus as a Creator, and his influence permeating all of nature. P here refers to one particular incarnation of Jesus, *Tjookabujera*. This is one of several cultural faces of Jesus which P will describe subsequently; the cosmic Christ is not limited to one persona or guise although the Spirit remains constant. In this case, *Tjookabujera* is the aspect of Jesus that is the representative of God, as P described in the previous chapter.

Other participants felt that Jesus was part of the spirits of the land, describing him as the same. One participant, speaking from a charismatic context, felt that Jesus has no connection whatsoever with Aboriginal spirits, and one must disengage from cultural spirits to engage with Jesus.

However the majority of participants affirmed their belief that Jesus, while working in accord with cultural spirit beings, is a presence distinct from them. The Rainbow Spirit Elders, introduced in the literature review, write:

When Christ's spirit lives in us as human beings, it is like the way spirit ancestors lived in our totems. That means the totem of Christ is not an animal or a bird but human

beings. We Christians are Jesus' totems. We bear Jesus' image, the true image of God. Jesus is our true spiritual ancestor.³⁰⁹

This perspective is slightly removed from those participants who see Jesus as existing eternally alongside ancestors, or who see him expressed in animals as messenger. It places Jesus within us in the same manner as a spiritual ancestor, granting him primacy.

Skye writes, 'All the [people] interviewed for this thesis see Christ as one with the ancestor spirits, they have been together since the beginning of Creation.'³¹⁰ While the people I interviewed did not see Christ as one with the ancestor spirits (they mainly felt he walks *with* them as a higher figure), the majority of participants firmly agree with Skye's findings: Christ has been with the ancestor spirits since the beginning of time.

Many Aboriginal writers recognise Jesus Christ as an ancestor. This is not a concept unique to Aboriginal Australian cultures. Catholic theology professor Benzenet Bujo wrote of Christ for African peoples as a proto-ancestor, not existing on a biological line, but placing him 'on the transcendental level, where he is the one from whom the existential life of the ancestors flows.'³¹¹

Missionary Don Richardson writes of early times in the Mediterranean church: Christianity fulfilling Greek prophesy rather than destroying it; Jewish and Greek language and

³⁰⁹ Rainbow Spirit Elders in *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 65.

³¹⁰ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 148.

³¹¹ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 144.

theological truths working together to express Christianity by a people who had been prepared for its coming by holding similar theological concepts.³¹²

Richardson holds that globally, people have been prepared by God for the coming of Christ, and explores hallmarks of this preparation in cultural contexts. Richardson writes of other countries visited by the missionary arrogance of refusal to recognise a present God, the same as their own, for example among the missionaries arriving in China and Korea, who refused to use local words for God, insisting that their God was a new concept needing a new name.³¹³ In Burma, in 1795, Richardson describes a hill tribe greeting their first white visitor with amazement and expectation, enquiring if he was the brother who had brought them the book promised by the Supreme God, Y'wa. They were still met with disbelief from the man, who could not credit these people with any knowledge of 'his' God and insisted they were mistaken.³¹⁴ Richardson believes that the Karen tribe's beliefs about the 'true god' Y'wa indicates monotheism predating both Judaism and Christianity.³¹⁵

Grace was present in these communities, and unrecognised and misjudged. This participant material strongly posits the recognition of grace that allowed Aboriginal communities to recognise the Christ figure when described by invaders.

This correlates to the grace Rahner believes all humans experience through the supernatural existential. However, for Rahner, people outside the Catholic Church experience God-given

³¹² Don Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts* (Regal Books: USA, 1981), 23.

³¹³ Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts*, 59-60.

³¹⁴ Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts*, 66.

³¹⁵ Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts*, 75.

emotions which they serve, but are also serving an 'absent God' whom they fail to find in their everyday lives and concepts.³¹⁶

These observations from places far removed from the locale that produced Christianity bring to mind a fundamental Catholic principle from *Lumen Gentium*, from which John Paul II spoke in his Alice Springs Address: the Universal Call to Holiness. This principle, espoused by Rahner and extrapolated in Chapter Five of *Lumen Gentium*, acknowledges that all can be moved by the same call to holiness by the Spirit of God.

For the scholars referenced here, and for the participants in this project, Jesus transcends social mores, and occupies a distinct space in cultures.

³¹⁶ McCool, *Rahner reader*, 196.

Cultural alert

A disclaimer around an upcoming cultural figure and an alert for Aboriginal readers regarding the following section:

When presenting my feedback to a group of Aboriginal academics and writers, there was advice from some participants around several areas. The three main areas were:

This material speaks only for the participants (some of the material around the incarnation of Jesus among Aboriginal communities was controversial).

This material is, by necessity, only a superficial exploration of basic themes. The sophistication and complexity of Aboriginal Christologies can never be encompassed by a single thesis, by a non-Aboriginal person.

The figure of *Kutatja* Man, discussed in depth by one of the participants, created concern among some delegates at the meeting. One felt his name should not be mentioned, while others disagreed with this participant's interpretation of the figure. Others felt it is appropriate to write about him with disclaimers. I have sought advice from my Reference Group and others, who advise that on the whole it is permissible to write about him, but to be very clear that each person and community has their own ideas on him. I write with their permission, but would like to advise that this figure will be discussed in the following sections. While I am advised by representatives from a range of nations that it is not

forbidden to discuss *Kutatja* Man, under Aboriginal direction I offer the opportunity of reader discretion.

In regards to *Kutatja* Man, Auntie Denise Champion stated that stories are interpreted differently, or are given different meanings, according to where they lie along the songline. Anne Pattel-Gray reminded me to beware that these are snippets; superficial; not representing full comprehensive and intricate Aboriginal theology. *Kutatja* Man is a long story and he has lots of roles. What's told in ceremony may be woven into many aspects of culture that I can't know about, and white people can not always know the context of these snippets. We should not take the following conversations out of context.

I close this alert by mentioning that the *Kutatja* information comes via a initiated cultural man and expert in intercultural responsiveness training, an initiated woman Elder, and a diverse range of Aboriginal people who were clear that it is better to understand the limits around *Kutatja* than to lose any learning of him altogether. At one point when I asked if it was ok for me to listen to a *Kutatja* story, it was explained to me that it is not up to me to decide what I hear, but up to the Aboriginal speaker. They decide, not me, and I should respect that decision. I have full confidence in my sources and their authority around my listening parameters.

One member of the community where I heard about *Kutatja* urged me to keep learning, reminding me that to discard information given is insulting to the teachers. She said that initiated people have a far better grasp of the passing of appropriate information than I do, and to receive what I am told with confidence and gratitude.

Common roles of Jesus

Denis Edwards acknowledges writers such as Raimundo Panikkar, who subscribes to a universal Christ unrelated to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.³¹⁷ The participants of this project however, will illuminate an area between Jesus of Nazareth as the one historical incarnation, and arguments that discount the historical figure. They do acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth, and have a devotion to him; but, as one of many expressions of this spirit, who appears to possess that quality of advanced transcendence that allows acceptance of God's offer of self to such a profound and sacred degree. They explain where Jesus sits for them in their worldview, including his Nazarene Incarnation, but beginning with his eternal presence in community and Country. The roles following have built into them an understanding of Jesus as a cosmic being, attached from the beginning of time to Creation and eternally inherent in nature.

It was in the themes arising from Jesus' role in people's lives that largely illustrate the way he is inculturated. Chapter Seven will be dedicated to discussing this inculturation, but first I examine these roles.

³¹⁷ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 64.

Across the participant cohort, there were several descriptions of Jesus Christ and his activities that fell into the same community roles or themes that provide a source of recognisable Jesus images to any Christian listener:

- Messenger
- Healer
- Support/strength
- Giver of life
- Stranger
- Giver of the law/teacher

In many of these roles will be seen a similar placement of Jesus into the community as is described as Wisdom, Sophia making a place for herself among people, to become one of them, to nurture, feed, heal, and sustain law. These aspects will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.

The evidence given that provided and justified this categorisation proved to be among the most powerful when listening to people talk. Hearing Jesus stories, often interspersed with language, had a strong impact on my sense of the omnipresence of Jesus. I recognised the Jesus I know through his same roles in my community. The diversity of the different language names, the desert context, the shadow of the prison bars, the ceremony, the institutionalised contexts, all served to focus on how the Jesus figure truly emerges through each culture to fulfil his salvific purpose of healing, supporting, including, teaching.

Much of the material above includes data falling into these categories. It is here supplemented with additional material arising from interview, largely anecdotal and highly illustrative of the way people see Jesus, as content falls within the context of their personal lives.

It may not be immediately clear why the obvious link between Jesus as a teller of parabolic sacred story (or Wisdom stories) and Aboriginal sacred story, often both imparting wisdom and rules for living, was not explored. The answer is twofold. Firstly, people wanted to talk about Jesus' nature in the areas listed, and secondly, this category is far too large to include in this work. I wrote on the subject for an undergraduate course and found the material abundant, comprehensive, and fascinating to a degree demanding more rigorous treatment than is possible here. I now turn to the categories, with examples from the voices of the participants themselves for illustration.

Messenger

Participant C told a story of an Elder he knew from a mission, and the story tells of when he died:

Jesus come and took him to Heaven, and he showed him ... Heaven and he said this is for you if you want it. Now this man had never been a Christian, but knew who Jesus Christ was-so he lived his life knowing who Jesus Christ was. And that's what he knew as a kid. And when he died, Jesus took him to Heaven and said do you want this? And then when he showed him Heaven, He also showed him his people back on Earth, and said you can stay with me, or you can go back. And he said he wanted to go back to his people. And he went back to his people, and this bloke was in a wheelchair with like his limbs cut off because of alcohol poisoning. And yet he chose to go back to that wheelchair that he was bound to, to be with his people.

Yeah, that's the story he shared with everybody-with a lot of people. That story was passed on to me and I found it very inspiring and powerful and empowering for black people in general you know. And he's since passed away but at least he knows that he doesn't have to change anything. He's just got to pass on the word about Jesus Christ, and say I have been there, I've been in Heaven, I know what it's like, you know.

I don't know whether he [became a Christian] or not, but I'm saying he's seen it. Like he didn't need to change who he was, or his values. God knew his heart was right; his heart was right with God.

Having seen the message of the afterlife, the old man lived out the rest of his days in serenity, and told many, many people the story. Like in other stories, after a lifetime of indifference to Christ's message, the old man became a secondary messenger of Jesus, in the tradition of all disciples.

Of interest to me was the strength of the man's kinship ties, that led him back to a painful life, his faith that he could do so knowing he would eventually see heaven, and the story's premise that as long as your 'heart is right with God', you will go to Heaven and be with Jesus. This is a concept that transcends all cultural mores, white and black.

P for the purposes of this interview described Jesus' work in two major (non-exhaustive) ways. He has talked about *Tjookabujera*, but he also, like other members of the Arrernte community, recognises *Kweke Man*. Later P will discuss the political, cultural and historical flawed aspects he sees in *Kweke Man*, and why he personally defines Jesus as *Kutatja Man*, the 'proper Jesus'. In these facets, P sees the creative role of Jesus.

Participant B sees herself, and members of her charismatic community, as extensions of Jesus; messengers on his behalf. This is not dissimilar from the Catholic missionary tradition of acting as Jesus' hands, articulated by St Teresa of Avila.

Christ is in us, in me, in you, and we are with him, and Jesus is with the Father. That's where we are all together. If you want to know the truth, the truth will come from a person like me. One way. One way for Jesus. [repeats in language] That's what it means.

In her Master's thesis, titled *Kerygmatics of the New Millennium*, Skye writes, 'We have been presented through colonialism with an imperialistic Christian theology that has denied the culture/theology/spirituality of Australian Indigenous Peoples.'³¹⁸ In light of this history, it is time for non-Aboriginal Christians to listen to the Australian messenger, the Aboriginal Jesus' message.

The participants see Jesus as a messenger in cultural manifestations, through dreams, and as one who creates messengers of ourselves in turn.

Healer

Like P, Mia drew strong comparisons between the work of Jesus and traditional healers. Where P, and other community members I heard from in Alice Springs, discussed *ngunkarri*, Mia described her own role as healer, working with *Ngkarte Utnenge*, the spirit people, and by extension, her cosmic Jesus:

(Jesus is) everywhere. Not only in this country but everywhere. In all Creation. Plants and everything too...even in the spirit people. In everything. And even in the

³¹⁸ Skye, *Yiminga calling*, p47.

traditional healer. The traditional healer from the spirit people. And from Jesus. All in one. And within traditional healers.

She went on to explain that when she was healing, she had *Ngkarte Utnege* in her, along with the spirit people. The gospels' description of Jesus' conferral of healing power upon his disciples appears to continue here. Mia seems to fall into this tradition within her own Arrernte method of healing.

Mia related a story that while hunting, a local family's little child received a fright when she heard something moving in the bushes so that her spirit jumped right out of her body. She became very sick and started vomiting ceaselessly, so they came home in the dark and knocked on Mia's door. By then the child was very dehydrated, and comatose.

It was very late. Her mum went and knocked on the door. I was sound asleep. So I got up. It was very late. And I opened the door for her and she said, "My little girl's very sick and she's been vomiting a lot." And I knew. I knew she had no spirit. So we both came that night and I asked, "Where is the little girl now?"

"She's inside sleeping." With her eyes deep down.

Her tummy like (gestures concave stomach). No spirit. And the other families were making noise. So I told the little girl's mum to tell the other families to quiet down. So I told her to lift up her little top. So she lifted her little top – her little blouse. And I went outside and I asked her, "Which way did you all go for hunting?" I asked her.

"We went that way." Very long. A lot of people go hunting very long way. Yeah.

And I stood outside with my hands open. My hands open. And my spirit went looking for that little girl's spirit. It didn't take long. My spirit found the little girl's spirit. This little girl's spirit was hiding under a bushes. Her little spirit was inside the bushes. Hiding away. And she had no spirit, that little girl. So my spirit went and grab her little spirit and brought it back to me. And I could feel them both coming back. And I was standing there with my eyes closed. And I could feel both of the spirit coming back inside me.

And I got up standing, I opened my eyes, because they were both inside me now. So I took the little girl's spirit inside and I placed her little spirit and she was lying down. I placed her little spirit rubbing like this [rubbing gently on stomach]. And as soon as I rubbed her little tummy, I put back her little spirit. And as soon as I put her little spirit back inside her body, I could see her little tummy coming back to normal. And her little eyes back to normal.

She got up and said, "Mum, I'm hungry". And I told her mum, "Feed her."

She's a teenager going to school now.

Other people in the room corroborated these events in a reverent, but matter-of-fact manner. Jesus helps Mia to heal in this community in a very real and unsurprising way. They simply accept this healing as part of their relationship with Jesus.

In this community, Jesus was seen by both representatives as a healer working with people alongside traditional cultural spiritual healing methods (with the assumption that Jesus is with the spirit people). Mia's story above obviously mirrors those of Jesus' healing and restoration of spirit. Jairus' daughter bears most resemblance (Mark 5: 39-43, Luke 8:52-56) along with Lazarus (John 11:11-44) and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-16).

While I was listening to this recount, I was reflecting on Rahner's views on hypostatic union. It seemed to be that Mia, when engaging with Jesus and the Spirit internally during this experience, was activating and engaging with the process of hypostatic union. Rahner acknowledges this potential in all people, but he also acknowledges diversity in its manifestation:

In thinking of a 'hypostatic union', we must not cling to a simple model of unity. The Hypostatic Union is an 'assumption' and a 'unification' that has the nature of a self-communication; there is 'assumption' so that God's reality may be communicated to what is assumed-that is, the human nature. But the very communication intended by

this 'assumption' is the communication of grace and glory, which are intended for all. In us, this communication is possible and effected precisely by the union and acceptance that occurs in the Hypostatic Union.³¹⁹

Mia overtly describes welcoming the spirit, or grace, into her person, to carry out healing, or salvation. Edwards describes Jesus as 'someone possessed and led by the Spirit of God.'³²⁰

This, along with Mia's first example above and the one to follow, brought to mind a conversation with Buckskin. While not a Christian, he explains that for his Kurna family, spirits with a particular role in life, be it healer, educator, or even assassin, will "fill" a person and influence that person to fulfil that role (not always with conscious awareness of the person). Incidentally, it is in this way that *Kutatja* works in his culture, illustrating in small part the diversity of representation of that figure.³²¹

Edwards discusses the Greek used in John to describe reciprocal abiding and the profound theological meaning of divine indwelling.³²² He states that 'Jesus is understood as someone on whom the spirit abides permanently and as someone who then acts in the power of the spirit.'³²³ The similarity between this, the apostles, and statements from P, Jack, and Mia, are clear. Edwards points to John 15:5, where Jesus tells the apostles that apart from him they can do nothing. This gospel passage resonates with the healers, like Mia, who have Jesus abiding in them when they heal.

³¹⁹ Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: a critical study of his major themes* (USA: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp 144-145.

³²⁰ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 58.

³²¹ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, June 17, 2020.

³²² Edwards, *The God of evolution*, 17.

³²³ Edwards, *The God of evolution*, 18.

Deane-Drummond writes of Jesus as a human shaped through his mother's teaching, his social and political environment and God's graceful action on him. Thus, his humanity was divinised during his lifetime (but she acknowledges that he was divine from the beginning of his existence).³²⁴

This text of Deane-Drummond's made me reflect on another thing I was taught by Buckskin, who explained that Elders are possessed of spiritual knowledge in the sense of having two physical viewpoints; being able to physically see a material and a spiritual world simultaneously.³²⁵ I wondered if this indicates harnessing of the hypostatic union transcendence, and whether this sort of knowledge would have been recognised by Jesus of Nazareth, who possibly possessed some variant of this power to its ultimate degree.

These reflections all have implications for thinking about Aboriginal forms of divine incarnation. There may never be a consensus, or a place to equitably discuss this issue of what western theology calls hypostatic union. But clearly, the Spirit is working in some way across all our cultures to manifest, represent, message-bear, or incarnate. It is probable that the internal process written of by Rahner is articulated within Aboriginal knowledge.

I was jointly told a story by Mia and a non-Aboriginal nun present at interview. The nun had been in a car accident a couple of years earlier. While the sister was unconscious in hospital, Mia sensed that her help was needed. Closing her eyes, she sent her spirit all the way to Queensland. She stated that Jesus and the spirit people were with her as she healed the

³²⁴ Deane-Drummond, "Christ and evolution" in *Zygon*, 537.

³²⁵ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, February 2017.

nun, who subsequently came to, recovered, and resumed her work. The sister gives Mia full credit for her recovery, and corroborated the fact that Mia knew of her injuries before formal communication was conveyed to the community. This recalls Edwards' description of being led by the Spirit.

Another Arrernte woman who wished to remain anonymous related the names of several spirits who come from the Creator to 'stay inside people.' Most stay inside all the time, but one goes out and visits people and comes back, 'like incarnation.'³²⁶ This not only made me reflect on Mia's ability to send out her spirit, but also Buckskin's description of spirits filling people and influencing their actions to fulfil roles for the common good.

Other participants focussed on Jesus' healing of spirit. Emma talks about services at her church, where people respond to communal storytelling sessions about Jesus.

...coming to the church has made (people) more confident. They've been such shut-off, angry people. They come into the church and you just see them like [scowls]. Angry spirit. And they all look like they want to lash out at you and you trying to sing up on stage. And you know you talk to them afterwards and like a couple of weeks later you see them and they've changed.

Emori adds his observation:

As soon as they see just two...like just me and her. [Indicates Emma] It can be a whole group of blackfullas just swearing and carrying on, and if I'm talking to someone else about Jesus or something, you can see them all start being quiet. They start looking and they end up coming over.

³²⁶ Anonymous, interview with author, 14th June 2018

Emma and Emori see Jesus healing over time, with the change in temperament and behaviours around substance misuse physically visible in community members.

Mrs. Ryder Jesus' role as healer in a way in which she takes a less active role in the healing process, preferring to offer up trials and pray for intercession, support and healing.

In 2008 I got sick. Got a very bad headache, went to the hospital, and from that blackout. When I woke up I was in Royal Adelaide Hospital.

I was in a coma for two weeks. Long time. My daughter and my son used to sit down on each side of the bed in Adelaide Hospital, visit me every day, but I was just laying there, you know? No opening eyes, no moving around, just laying there.

(One) day, doctor come. They were sitting at the side of my bed, doctor come and told my son, "Do you reckon your mum'll respond if you ask her to squeeze your hand very tight?" And he reckoned, yes, then he asked me, "Mum, if you can hear me, can you squeeze my hand?" And he reckoned I squeezed his hand really tight, and the doctor was standing right there and all watching, and the doctor told him, if a person is in a coma this long, this kind of thing doesn't happen.

But I can tell you now that this can only be a miracle. And from then on, once I started opening my eyes, not talking, looking at my son and daughter, still you know in my own world, but gradually I got better at it and better every day. They started feeding me then. And I'm here now. I thank Jesus for that, you know?

Once again we see the food being administered after a healing by the intercession of Jesus, like Mia's healing of the child. In this way, we see Jesus as life-giver within the role of healer, as well as the Johannine and Lukan symbolism of Jesus as nourishing food (John 6:32-58, Luke 22:19). Manger symbolism in Luke establishes a theme of Jesus feeding that continues throughout the gospel.³²⁷

³²⁷ Michael van Sloun, "The Eucharist, Christmas and the Manger", *The Catholic Spirit* (2018), <https://thecatholicspirit.com/faith/focus-on-faith/faith-fundamentals/the-eucharist-christmas-and-the-manger>.

Participant B sees Jesus' healing role as direct and bestowed primarily through prayer. While other participants such as Mia and Mrs. Ryder describe processes to go through, such as laying on of hands, walking out, engaging with spirit, seeking, and eating, for Participant B it is all down to the direct intervention of prayer (and to a lesser extent, the rejection of inculturated Christianity):

I was very very sick. I was very very ill, and I accepted Christ. That time when I was very ill I was been going to this other church...but they did two. Two ways of learning. They did Jesus, but then go back there again [to culture]. So somehow God took me out from this place. And then I didn't go there anymore. I just stayed at home and they asked me, why don't you go to church anymore? And then one day I got really really sick. That's when I sat down with Yolngu for Jesus and they came around to my place and we had a meeting, a prayer meeting. And that's when I got healed, and I gave up everything. Yes, and here I am. Yes, and when I get sick, I just pray, and I just get straight away healed.

Rhaneé also identified Jesus as a healing presence in the form of rifts between people and attendant negative emotions:

(Jesus is) definitely (working in a healing sense) because there is still a lot of healing to be done throughout Australia. For our First Peoples. The relationships between First and Second Peoples. There's just so much that is left unspoken and untouched that need to be. Projects like this here are so good in repairing broken relationships, and Jesus is about reconciling relationships. Reconciling not only to each other but ourselves to God.

The theory of multiple attestation deems Jesus' acts of healing to be historical fact. The examples from the communities above are attested to by many eyewitnesses, several of whom I personally spoke with. It was a powerful and profound experience, to be with people actively engaging with Jesus Christ's healing energy, and describing concrete events, not narratives smacking of urban legend, with deep, unquestioning faith. Edwards describes

Jesus' healing ministry as showing "that ...salvation...is a physical, bodily matter. It embraces health, sanity, relationships, community, and wholeness."³²⁸ These elements can be seen in the stories presented by participants in this section.

Rahner writes of revelation as:

That transcendental relation between man and God which is constituted by God's self-communication of a supernatural kind, made to every mind by grace, but inescapably and always...if transcendence always has its very being in history, is always mediated historically, and if man has a transcendental condition which is constituted as a permanent feature of his life as a person precisely by what we call divinising grace by God's self-communication (not by some other causal operation), then precisely that absolute transcendence directed towards the absolute intimate presence of the ineffable mystery giving himself to man has a history and this is what we call the history of revelation.³²⁹

Rahner does place the caveat that the revelation event, involving the mediation in an historical sense of God's offer and human transcendence to meet it, must be the result of a genuine self-communication of God through grace event and not a misinterpretation.³³⁰ This leaves a very large gap for interpretation. I argue that when Mia and P talk about transcendental experiences (when healing, when at ceremony), it is no-one's place to argue but their own that they are not experiencing genuine grace experiences. Therefore, cannot other people in their communities experience a similar level of transcendence to achieve communion with or abiding of the spirit of Jesus Christ, whether in them as for Mia, or incarnating in their communities as appropriate guises such as for P, Emma, Emori, and Claire? Of course, for Rahner, the unique culmination of this history of revelation has

³²⁸ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 71.

³²⁹Karl Rahner, "Observations on the concept of revelation" in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and tradition* (West Germany: Herder KG, 1966), 13.

³³⁰Rahner, *Revelation and tradition*, 14.

occurred in Jesus of Nazareth.³³¹ Some participants of this study feel that this culmination was not unique, and this will be discussed in the following chapter.

Both Pattel-Gray and Skye write comprehensively on the capacity of Aboriginal theologies to heal everyone, not only the Aboriginal peoples to whom it is most vital. On a community level, P commented that we must work collectively to dismantle colonisation because colonisation hurts everyone. 'Heal one, heal all.'

It is humbling that despite the devastating and brutal colonisation which continues on the continent, so many members of Aboriginal communities teach that the healing power of Jesus, described as such a close phenomenon in the lives above, is the most reconciliatory and restorative way forward for everyone, including the oppressors who may be unknowingly damaged by their position.

Support/strength/love

When coding the data for this project, I found different categories for Jesus' roles from Skye; however, this area was consistent. Skye's study (using a different paradigm) classified the Christ figure as 'strength' and 'guide' among other things.³³²

When talking about Jesus' role as a source of support and strength, many participants identified a sense of peace given by the spirit of Jesus. P describes the cultural aspects of

³³¹ Rahner, *Revelation and tradition*, 14-15.

³³² Rahner, *Revelation and tradition*, 31.

Jesus as *Kweke* Man and another incarnation of Jesus, *Kutatja*, as givers of life, love, and peace:

(With *Kweke* Man) there's two interpretations that you've got to go back and clarify. One is the giver of gifts, a bit like the way that the ration station used to give out rations and flour and sugar and everything like that. And then the other one is the Arrernte word *kweke* but it's not called that in our language. It's the *yunganyila*. Which means like the giver. Yeah, giver. Like but circle way.³³³

So that symbol sort of became like a symbol of Jesus being the giver of life, the giver of love, the giver of peace, so when you sleep at night, nah, *Kweke* Man, *Kutatja* is there for you. So you're right, you can have good sleep, and you don't have to worry about waking up and mob gone, you know? Your brothers or your sisters are gone, or whatever...a good thing, a good strong spirit, you know? Yeah.

Mrs. Ryder has a close personal connection to Jesus that sustains her through the hardships of her life:

But there's these little things that I do in the parish, I offer all that up to Him. For what he did to me. I was in a dark tunnel and I saw the light at the end of it and went through that light. I'm back here now!

I had three losses in my family. Two older sons and daughter number three, and a grandson. But I stood strong you know, even though when in grief I prayed. I prayed so hard for Jesus to look after me. Give me strength, Lord. Help me stand on my own two feet. Give me the strength I need, Lord, I ask Him that you know?

And I still do it today, you know? I pray from the time I get up in the morning 'til the time I go to bed. I don't go to sleep in the middle of the night, you know, I get up. Sit up and say my rosaries. I'm thankful to the Lord you know, for looking after me, and still is looking after me.

Emma was asked how she sees Jesus actively working in her community.

Every day. I think I see him mostly in the way that when I see people loving people, obviously, because that's the first thing he said; you'll be known through your love. And when I see people loving people in the community and this is like an

³³³ To clarify, P is multilingual, so is explaining between languages.

unconditional love that Aboriginal people seem to have, more so than any other culture you know.

Like everybody who comes into our church, non-Indigenous and Indigenous, they say things like, you really know how to do community, you really know how to do family. And we really only know how to do that because we know how to love through the love that we receive from Christ. So that's where I see him. I see him in the love that we have for each other and that unconditional love that we have for each other in the Aboriginal church. And in the community.

But you know, it's really hard because, I'm not going to lie, I'll come straight out with it and be honest, there're a lot of Aboriginal people who are dependent on drugs and alcohol. And you know, as much as they stress you out, they're still your family, you know. You'll protect them and you'll love them no matter what. You hardly will ... see them say stories like, and then I was out on the streets homeless.

You hear that a lot in other cultures, in other people's cultures, that they were homeless for this amount of years. But Aboriginal people always surfing on somebody's couch, because somebody always loves them. And I see God in that. Hospitality. That hospitable spirit is one of the best spirits to have, and Aboriginal people have it... I think it's really beautiful... that whole caring, that looking out for one another, that's where I see (Jesus) the most in the Aboriginal community.

Like Auntie [L] there, she's not even a Christian, but she's got the biggest loving heart. She'd be such a good Christian.

A link to Rahner's anonymous Christian theory can be discerned in Emma's approach to non-Christians engaging with their indwelling grace. *Lumen Gentium* states:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator... Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.³³⁴

³³⁴ "*Lumen Gentium*", Ch. II, 16.

Notwithstanding the patronising tone of the contemporary fathers, with references to ‘shadows and images’ and gender-exclusive terminology, the intention is obvious. All people, Christian or not, are exposed to God’s grace and eligible for his salvation. Rahner could not bring himself to believe that a loving God would condemn people who may be ignorant of Jesus, but good people as a result of God’s grace. However, *Lumen Gentium* does exclude from salvation those who are aware of the Catholic Church but refuse to enter.³³⁵ This is perhaps one of the more dated elements of the document.

In addition, Rahner was firm on religious responsibility. Salvation involves a degree of Church membership, not faith in Jesus Christ alone.³³⁶ This is perhaps a view changing with the times, as Rahner in this context did not refer to the good works espoused by Jesus, but rather sacramental obligations such as Baptism. The participants value ceremony, including the Catholic sacraments in some cases, but as will be seen, a key value in their spiritual lives is connected to Jesus on Country and as a constant presence, rather than necessarily Church obligations as a prerequisite for salvation.

I hope that this project will serve to illustrate that that part of *Lumen Gentium* is a culture-centric construct, that has not dated well in light of ecumenical developments in understanding how peoples of different faiths and cultures access and celebrate the one God.

³³⁵ “*Lumen Gentium*”, Ch. II, 14.

³³⁶ Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, 33.

Similarly, Rhanee confirms Jesus' role to play with love, and, like Emma, identifies the challenge this can engender when working with those people traumatised and damaged by intergenerational colonial abuses, such as the Stolen Generations and institutionalised racism.

So I guess knowing Jesus and the type of person he was and the type of life that he lived, and being Christian is about having a Christ-centred focus. I suppose within my community, we're really big on being role models for the next generation.

I see the action of love that Jesus had plays a really big part because the people in our communities have been damaged that badly that love is foreign to them. So the idea of love for people is sometimes hard to grasp.

Participant C, like Mrs. Ryder, expresses a deeply personal connection to Jesus and the transformative nature of his love.

I'm definitely much happier now. Before when I was in gaol I wake up every day wondering where I'm going to get my next bong of marijuana from you know, or my next drink from. Now I wake up in the morning and I can go to the supermarket and buy milk and bread any day of the week. You know?

I got a house, I got a car, I got a job you know. And it's all because of the grace of God, you know, that this is happening to me. I can think of no other reason why, I cannot put it on any other reason.

It's all about your heart. As long as your heart is right with God, don't have to stand on a street corner with placards shouting Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus wants you to love him in secret but share your love for Jesus Christ with people when they ask. Don't burden people with it, if people don't want to hear it.

But people's hearts that are, you know, vulnerable and open to Jesus Christ are still the ones you want to give it to, you know? And just be good, be kind to people in general. That's the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what's been done for me. All that ... time I was inconsiderate, selfish, nasty person. I didn't care about anybody. I was selfish. I was all about me. But it's not about me anymore, you know. It's about Jesus Christ. That's where the love comes from.

Participant C's contribution here also has links to the healing section, considering the way this participant's life has been healed and has so many positives compared to before his relationship with Jesus commenced.

I return to P speaking about his 'proper Jesus', *Kutatja* Man. He speaks of how cultural figures were demonised by the church, but ultimately, what is effective in his community is love and positive affirmation, the source of which is *Kweke* Man-Jesus:

So the symbolism is, we should be motivated by the good things, do the right thing, and you get a reward. Or do the right thing and you have peace. Rather than you do the wrong-punitive- you do the wrong thing, he's going to come, steal you, grab you. Make you sick.

You think about any blackfulla, the church, the number one thing that the church did when they came in, is they instilled fear of God and fear of death into blackfullas. Prior to that blackfullas didn't fear death, because when we die we go back to Country. We happy. We just sit along everybody's shoulder with everyone else. See? With all you ancestors all right there (indicates shoulders and arms). They all following you. So when I die, I just go back with them and I'll be on the young fullas' shoulders. I'll be there, right?

But as soon as they put the fear of death, damnation, hell and brimstone, torment, torture, da da da da, they put that fear of God. And as soon as they did that, *Kutatja* became that evil devil spirit that you fear, from culture. And as soon as they did that, *Kutatja* became presented that way. But I say to my young fullas, "What motivates you to live a good life? Fear? Or when Uncle says, 'Hey you make me feel proud. I love you.'" You know?

Positive affirmation. Everybody knows it's positive affirmation that makes people strong. And so the *Kweke* Man come from-this is on our side- the *Kweke* Man come from-"You know the *Kweke* Man hey!" (big happy grin, inclusive arms-wide gesture).

In this instance, the *Kweke* Man manifestation of Jesus has defeated colonial attempts at demonisation and the true sustaining, nurturing and loving qualities of the spirit of Jesus are revealed. Regarding the punishment aspect of *Kutatja*, it is interesting to note an observation of Edwards', that 'Jesus did not oppose positive use of power. On the contrary

he embodied it in himself, and encouraged it in others.³³⁷ Jesus rebuked those doing wrong in a way that allows for *Kutatja* to be an aspect of Jesus and still address wrongdoing in the community.

P says that the significance of these spiritual faces of Jesus' presence and contributions change depending on community need and context, for example during circumstances of initiation or customary law. The roles played by this spirit are very different, but are all facets of the one spirit named Jesus by non-Aboriginal Christians.

This manifestation of an aspect of Jesus depending on community need not only recalls the Catholic traditions of Mass, Rosary meetings, prayer meetings, and dedicated fellowship such as sacraments for healing, the dying, marriage, childbirth, and saints to intercede with Jesus for all occasions. It suggests a synergetic relationship such as that described by Rahner and embodied in the Papal Address.

Giver of life

Most participants talk about Jesus as a metaphorical giver of life, as in Jesus brings quality to our physical lives. However Emori sees Jesus as literally one who decides to bestow life:

I reckon [Jesus works for us] just everyone being alive 'cause everyone could be dead. He wouldn't really have to put up with us, but he [does].

Emma embellishes on this perspective:

³³⁷ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 68.

And how many times he saves people's lives. Over and over again. Like you know they say I should be dead, I should be dead. But you're not, because he doesn't want you dead, you know? He wants you to do something, he's kept you for a purpose.

And you know now, there's some of our top leaders, and these are young people, old people. We have people who are 60 and they're babies in Christ but they've just flourished over the years. Then we have young ones, as young as 6, telling us about dreams they've had with Jesus.

Jesus appears again as a messenger in dreams, this time in a life-giving, or life-enhancing, capacity.

Jesus' influence as transformative is a quality also recognised by Participant C. Their new lives, or the lives they see being given to others, are a gift given from Jesus.

Right, well, I became a Christian in 2010 ... I just come into church and it felt like the Holy Spirit was you know, coming to me and letting me know that Jesus Christ is real and I sort of just embraced that and I don't know, just slept on it one night and just thought, today I'm going to give my heart to Jesus. I'm going to be baptised... I just went to church and listened to the preachers, and how other Christians interacted, and you know, the story of Jesus Christ and what he endured for me, and my heart was open to, was receptive to, the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit penetrated my heart you know, and said Jesus Christ loves you, what are you going to do about it?

But yeah being a Christian is the best thing that's ever happened to me, because it's changed my life. Changed my whole perspective on life. I know in my heart that I'm saved. I was raised in a Lutheran church, but having become ... a Christian ... means nothing, it's all about Jesus Christ, you know? We as a whole are the church, you know?

And just ... change your life and give your life to me and I'll give you a new body and a new soul, you know. And I believe that. And that's what's happened with me. ...[I let my family] know the influence Jesus Christ has had on my life you know, and how I've transformed to who I am today. But I know why Jesus sent me there [to see them]. He wanted me to go and see the life I lived before I went to gaol, all those years ago... because he wanted me as a witness to them. To see how much I've changed, so they can see me as a new Creation.

As well as ongoing active community engagement, P makes several references to life and life-giving attributes of Jesus, attributing this as Jesus' key role with both scriptural and community references.

...Jesus' comments when He was on Earth, you know...I come to give life and give it abundantly. He's been doing that since time immemorial. And it's in relationship with him that you draw life.

J's use of the present tense positions Jesus as current life-giver, while using past tense to distinguish between Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ. He also references scripture, and Jewish blood imagery, to place Jesus as an ongoing example for people to follow, connecting to both the teacher and historically cultural aspects of Jesus:

Jesus died 2000-odd years ago, He died for our sins ... and love...well it's the same thing. Love, and sacrifice. And the importance of the shedding of blood. Putting others first before yourself...this is my culture. If there was anybody hungry or thirsty or starving at home, the warriors, the men, would have to pierce the blood underneath their nail with a sharp stick- and you know how under your nail how it pisses out blood-and give it to an old person or a baby to suck on to give them life. And this is not the only one, there are hundreds of examples. Jesus fulfilled that. He reminded us that our culture is all about sacrifice for others.

For Participant A and Participant B, Jesus gives life in his role as saviour. Participant B returns to John:

We just do Jesus...John 3:6 says 'I am the way, the truth and the light. No-one can come to the Father except through me.' ... I really love those verses because ... we have been set free. He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world. To save all of us... Not just ... Aboriginals but for all, the whole nation.

Participant A also relies on John to express her perception of Jesus as a saviour.

Jesus is described as the light here too. He's the light of the world. That's in John 1. Jesus is also our saviour. We believe that he found us.

Talking about Jesus 'finding us' could imply, outside of the shepherd image conjured, Jesus' recognition of Aboriginal culture, and the recognition of Aboriginal cultures Jesus recognises in the Papal address. It is also a precursor of the synergetic relationship between Jesus and communities that will be discussed in the inculturation section.

Stranger

This was a recurring role of Jesus that particularly spoke to me. In the Irish Catholic tradition, there is a strong commitment to hospitality and charity for the stranger. It is typified in an old, well-known prayer:

I saw a stranger yestreen
I put food in the eating place
Drink in the drinking place
Music in the listening place
And in the name of the sacred Triune,
He blessed myself and my house
My cattle and my dear ones
And the lark sang in her song
Often, often, often, goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

Growing up on the dingo songline, I was aware of Aboriginal stories where ancestral spirits, coming as strangers, would reveal themselves to lay down laws, such as the *Ngarrinedjeri* story of *Thukeri*, where the fishers were punished for not sharing food with a stranger. Emma and Emori spoke of the three strangers (who were yet known to the people as deities) of whom Jesus was one. Of course Christians in the western tradition are familiar with Jesus disguising himself as a stranger, from the gospel.

Mrs. Ryder saw Jesus as coming among people in the guise of a common person, with his message to charity and humility to spread, and spoke at length on the theme.

You can find Jesus anywhere. Even if it's in a person, you know? This person might be an ordinary person, but when you study the way he talks, then you'll think, you know? He's someone special, you know? And you'll realise that in that person, there's Jesus there. Yeah?

In everyday life, you know, you come across people, and when you see those people you find that they are all different. But among every one of those people, there's Jesus inside that person. I'm a person that taught my grandchildren about the Lord, you know? Lord Jesus. And I told them if you ever walk around in town, you know, and you see someone sitting on the footpath with raggedy clothes and that, you know? You might find that he's hungry, never eaten anything you know? And if you got money you stop and give him something you know? Maybe five dollars. And they got to know that you know. As they grew up they been doing that, you know? A few times.

Cause Jesus disguise himself as an ordinary person. And he walks through the towns. Among the people. Among the ordinary people. And he might ask someone, you know? "You got two dollars?" Just to test that person out you know? And the person might – "No! I don't have two dollars! Not for you!" That's when Jesus realises you know that. He disguise himself just to test that person. He become a – give me two dollars – you know? Not that he really wanted the two dollars, he just test people out.

And some people might just come past that person and they might ask the same thing and someone might put his hand in his pocket and give him two dollars. Even for water. Some people are sitting around the table having a few drinks. Two drinks; water. This person might come along, you know? And he might say, "Please can I have some water?" And that person might give him water. Then he'll go away.

Then when the time comes, you know, and that person dies and he goes up to heaven and comes face-to-face with Jesus, and Jesus will say this to him: "Hey, I asked you for water and you gave me water." And the person might say, "Lord, when did you ask me for water? I don't remember you asking me for water."

"You remember that day?" Jesus will say. "Remember that day when you was around the table and I came up to you and asked you if I could have some water? That was me!" Jesus gets around every day. He ... walks among people every day.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of the western Christian tradition of

Christ as a stranger:

In total reality, (Jesus) comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbour, as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you, makes demands on you.

That is the great seriousness and great blessedness of the Advent message. Christ is standing at the door; he lives in the form of a human being among us. Do you want to close the door or open it? It may strike us as strange to see Christ in such a near face, but he said it, and those who withdraw from the serious reality of the Advent message cannot talk of the coming of Christ in their heart, either. . . Christ is knocking.³³⁸

Mrs. Ryder's comments illuminate Bonhoeffer's Christ, calling to action in the community.

Bonhoeffer acknowledges that which is confronting to me in much of the participant material; this closeness to Jesus, this walking side by side with him on a daily basis. And in both traditions, Jesus can be seen knocking at the door, calling for engagement and compassion to peers, embodying the mystery of his presence in a stranger's guise, and facilitating his kingdom by calling to action. Jesus was a stranger in Troy's community too, albeit in a slightly different focus, but he too created action for change in both Troy's ancestor and in the community.

Giver of the law/teacher

³³⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the manger: reflections on Advent and Christmas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 2.

Several participants were explicit in their affirmation that Jesus, in their communities, was and is a giver of the law, teacher, or medium between God and community using ceremony and ceremonial associations.

For Emma, this role is rooted in Creation and linked to the primary Adnyamathanha ancestral being:

The three men came to instruct in the law, and they came to warn and come and tell people what the right way was. People would listen to those three men, but there was still under that banner of the *Akurra*. They would still follow, and keep those places to keep the *Akurra* happy. But they would listen to those three men when the three men came because they know those three men were the more powerful beings.

For Emori, *Akurra* appears as the primary Creator, while the Trinity was giving law to the people.

Akurra was creating, in Adnyamathanha way we say he was creating the whole world, the landscape and everything about the world. And them three fullas was just telling them what they need to do.

Participant C applies the role in a more personal way. Rather than viewing instructions being given to his community as a whole, he has a personal, internalised relationship with the spirit of Jesus as guide.

Because the (spirit of Jesus) keeps, you know, reminding me. If I went out of line before, if I've said something inappropriate, not verbally but in my heart, or thinking something that's wrong, I'm reminded of it. It just tells me that he's saying, "Be careful, son", you know? Just what you might say might impact on someone else in a negative way and when I do at times say something...I just think that I shouldn't have said that, you know.

And I'm always asking for forgiveness because that's what I do. Yes we sin, but we don't want to live in sin do we? ...there's ways I used to deal with things. Like now I don't. I don't even swear... Being a Christian hasn't been easy because that place where I was (gaol), my kindness was taken for weakness. And as Jesus Christ said, Look, it's ok to be ridiculed in my name, you know? And that's what I want. And if you can handle that, well then, more power to you. And then so I embrace that.

Participant C here again reflects that transformative quality of Jesus in his life that he described previously.

Troy identifies Jesus as the knowledge-keeper for his people:

I believe that Jesus is the one who was here with us Aboriginal people for a long time. And that's given us these gifts today, and that put us here...the first people of this country. Today. And I believe all the spirits, ancestors of the bush, the nature. And Jesus is, Jesus is the knowledge-keeper, and for wisdom.

Troy has already talked about God's and Jesus' cultural name and being known to the people (note that these appeared to be interchangeable in the story and I sometimes would clarify if he meant Jesus). Here he explains Jesus' role as law giver in the context of sharing and inclusion in his community.

...everyone's equal and we like to share. And it's always been that way. And we don't get lots from nature. What nature gives us is what we have, what we want. But it gives us big mob. If they heard Jesus and all his group gives us lots of things, then we get those things. If we say we're going hunting for turtle, and there's a lot of turtle and we get too much, then we have to go back in the community and we have to share it with others. We've been practising, yeah I believe that we have been practising Christianity a long time.

...those instructions come from the brother. From *Ngepan* Jesus.³³⁹ Because we know him as *Ngepan* Jesus. And His Father, we known Him as *Yile Neki*. *Ngepan* Jesus

³³⁹ Bill Forshaw, a linguist at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr College in Wadeye, Northern Territory, explains that *ngepan* means 'spirit' (Bill Forshaw, email message to author, 18 September).

speaks to the Elders and...it was passed on all the way from generation to generation until this generation I am talking now.

Troy's perspective of how Jesus works in community today is indicated by his use of the present tense in the preceding excerpts. He actually changed the tense of my question about instructions in the first instance, to indicate that instructions on how to live continue to be generated from Jesus in the present tense.

This sharing with everyone, and the care by healthy men for the lesser as described by P around blood-letting, are reminiscent of the Jesus Edwards describes as deriving compassion for the poor, hurt and outcast from his vision of the torah (the primacy of the love of God and love of neighbour).³⁴⁰ Everyone is included in both traditions, but Troy articulates that Jesus issued this directive from the beginning, rather than during an explicit human ministry. For P, respectively, Jesus gives the rules through constant, eternal incarnation and engagement with the community.

For Troy, Jesus speaks the rules to the Elders and the Elders transmit the information over the generations. Troy clearly sees Jesus as the giver of wisdom and instruction in all things cultural, and refers to him by his name in language. Troy has already described how his people know God by his cultural name of *Yile Neki*, and Jesus as *Yile Neki* or *Ngathan-brother*. Like the *Arrernte* women, Jesus is assigned an alternative kinship tie which is interchangeable with non-Aboriginal concepts of 'son'. Jesus is not only a cultural man to Troy but the source of all things cultural.

³⁴⁰ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 63.

Rahner wrote on the communal nature of the human person:

...the very nature of Christian communion necessarily generates a political responsibility, generates politics, and hence generates a political theology...But now we live in a society that has made social and socio-political transformation the proper object of its very reflections and activity. We not only define our private existence in terms of a system of societal coordinates, we refuse to see that system of coordinates as fixed, and we change it. But thereby Christian love of neighbour and communion acquire a field of responsibility for the social structures required for life worth human living, a life that is 'Christianly possible', in a society of maximal unification to this end...It is no longer a simple deductive intelligence. It is a matter of freedom, in itself and as such.³⁴¹

Troy's description of his people having practised Christianity for a long time, and pointing to community care and responsibility, reflect these social structures that allow for the practise of Christianity. Rahner's 'private existence' is not an established cultural norm among many Aboriginal peoples, as skin groups and kinship responsibilities often take precedence over the individual. Societal co-ordinates are regular, if not fixed, in Aboriginal communities where these community dynamics are allowed to be practised unmolested. It is an interesting question whether these pre-invasion community laws allow Christianity, with its emphasis on love of neighbour and pastoral care, to be practised more authentically to Jesus of Nazareth's teachings, than a contemporary, rich, European church.

P sees Jesus in the role of example of law and enforcer through one form of his current physical presence in community. For P, Jesus incarnates in the community according to the context. As a law-giver and mediator, the spirit of Jesus appears as *Kutatja*:

³⁴¹ Karl Rahner, *The love of Jesus and the love of neighbor* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1983), 90.

If you fucked up, you need to fear the *Kutatja* Man. Because that's where he would bring sickness; that's when he would bring desolation; that's when, you know, mob would be taken. That's why we paint our boys in white ochre. Because if those families did wrong, two things with the white ochre is that [language] when it was best ceremony time, and we could see the boys coming and trying to (language), so if you paint them in white, you can see them, right. Second thing is that when (different name in language) take them, you can see them getting taken. So you can chase after them.

What people have said, and this is all around fear of purgatory, fear of punitive, punitive-it's all around motivations... And so you do the right thing for fear of something going wrong with *Kutatja*. The misrepresentation of *Kutatja* is that if you do the right thing, *Kutatja* rewards you. So that's where they get *Kweke* Man from in my experience, because the *Kutatja* Man is the proper Jesus.

He brings life, and love, and happiness, and joy, and peace when you sleep. Don't worry, *Kutatja* there, he's watching you. 'Cause you done right way. You bin cook that meat proper way, you face it back to Country, you bin sing proper song, you do proper, right? You even follow that old person. *Kutatja*'s happy for you. See? He don't got to put his feather foot on to come, sneak in, murder, take something. Because you're there.

So the symbolism is, we should be motivated by the good things, do the right thing, and you get a reward. Or do the right thing and you have peace. Rather than you do the wrong-punitive.

P's words recall Skye, who described the Aboriginal Jesus as 'bringer of peace, joy, and wholeness.'³⁴²

For P, *Kutatja* Man is the loving yet critical presence who is there to protect, but must be observed through ritual. His relationship to the community holds many similarities to that shared between Jesus and the Catholic community.

Like the Catholic obligation to fast before Mass and at certain times of the week and year, so food preparation protocols must be observed. As Catholics sing hymns to Jesus, songs

³⁴² Skye, *Yiming calling*, 203.

appropriate to *Kutatja* are sung. As Catholics must try to avoid sin, the *Kutatja* Man's people must do the right thing to avoid spiritual censure. There are consequences for disobeying the laws of Jesus/*Kutatja* in both communities. There are clear rules in the *Arrernte/Luritja/Pintupi* community and the Catholic community to avoid these consequences. P has outlined some for us here, and in the Catholic church the most obvious examples include the sacraments referred to above such as Reconciliation and Eucharist.

Interestingly, I have several non-Christian Aboriginal friends living here at the bottom of the dingo songline who take pains to stay in *Kutatja* Man's good books, and who explained to me the meaning of left feathers in different contexts.³⁴³ A Wiradjuri friend described *Kutatja* Man as a watcher. 'He watches over you, and protects you. But you do the wrong thing, you get a feather. On your pillow or something. On your bed. In your place you get a feather. Then look out because *Kutatja* Man going to get you.'³⁴⁴

While what my participants say is only representative of their community, not of all, there seemed to be one particular similarity: *Kutatja* Man is always law-giving. No matter what individual and community beliefs and knowledge around *Kutatja* Man are, this one aspect resonates with a role of Christ for some.

For Participant B, her perspective on Jesus as law-giver is presented through her group's interpretation of the Bible, rather than a cultural lens.

Since I joined that group, Yolngu for Jesus, I just stopped. I completely stopped from everything. I used to go with this other person, out, you know? A man. But one day

³⁴³ These people requested that they remain anonymous.

³⁴⁴ Anonymous, interview with author, October 1, 2019.

he called me and I said, No, I'm for Jesus. And then he completely stopped calling me. You got a wife, you got children, you got grandchildren, stop it. I'm with Jesus now. But once when he gets into trouble and he called me and he said can you pray for me and I said, ok, I will pray for you.

Participant B has embraced the laws of Jesus prohibiting fighting, drinking, and adultery, which are the things she was alluding to. These are Biblical laws, but reinforced by Jesus' laws of peace as she sees them.

However she has also embraced Jesus' laws of charity and prayer as she prays for the man she views as a sinner. Jesus' law of non-judgement and forgiveness is borne out in Participant B's applications of his law. Rather than a manifestation in the cultural community, Participant B sees Jesus as individually internalised for each person. God applies the law through his spirit in one's heart rather than through Jesus as a physical community figure.

Interestingly, to me as a Catholic, the participants did not identify Jesus as 'saviour' in explicit terms; not enough to create its own category with faithfulness to the data. I had assumed that mission influence would produce this terminology. However many of the things in this section imply saving in many ways; healing the sick, redeeming lives, etc. These things are obvious and to the participants clearly did not need belabouring; or my cultural lens is murky, and the good of the community may be so inherent in people's intentions that saving, until colonisation, did not need to be part of the mindset.

[Literature relating to the roles](#)

One piece of literature that speaks to these roles comes from Champion, who co-authored

Jesus as divine tracker:

God is a divine Tracker, finder of lost children, enacter of justice, carer across cultures. At times I am lost. I am cut off from God and far from my community. So I need God to track me, to see the broken twig and spot the disturbed rock. To do what seems difficult, near impossible, and find me. This tracking is done because this God is 'deeply placed', as Creator and Incarnate, as Revealer in the land that speaks.³⁴⁵

Champion calls to mind the elements of Rahner's hypostatic union previously discernible in Aboriginal spiritual activity, such as with Mia and Claire, and also the embeddedness of God in Creation described by several participants. She also, like P, recognises the manifestation of God across diverse 'God-bearers', itself a wonderful phrase when reflecting on hypostatic union:

God is revealed through Indigenous Aboriginal culture, not only through rainbow theologies, but through God-bearers like Warrianha, in whom God in Incarnate, as the atoning, tracking One.³⁴⁶

Warrianha is her tracker uncle, Alf. Champion emphasises that this is not a Dreaming story. Alf searches the land to rescue, nurture and sustain, to bring home, to save. The method used here applies biography to theology, yet still contains elements of hypostatic union. The reaching spirit in Alf welcomes the divine, and he becomes the spirit-infused, or the God-bearer, Alf.

The Hypostatic Union is the highest conceivable—the ontologically highest—actualisation of the reality of a creature, in the sense that a higher actualisation

³⁴⁵ Taylor and Champion, *Jesus as divine tracker*, 20-21.

³⁴⁶ Taylor and Champion, *Jesus as divine tracker*, 21.

would be absolutely impossible. It is the absolutely highest manner of being there is apart from God's.³⁴⁷

Rahner refers to Jesus Christ, as the ultimate hypostatic union. But for Champion, and other speakers from whom we will hear in the next chapter, people can assume divine aspects in this way. I wondered whether P's incarnations of Jesus are for some Aboriginal Christians a result of humans displaying divine traits or examples of hypostatic union on par with Jesus of Nazareth. When we see Alf, Mia, Claire, Mrs Ryder's strangers, we see Rahner's hypostatic union at work in the everyday spirituality he espouses. This is distinct from the ultimate level of that union achieved in the body of Jesus Christ of Nazareth in this sense. As we have seen, some Aboriginal participants believe this union was and is achieved on an ongoing basis (linked to non-linear time perceptions). But these are characterised, at least during this study, by enduring cultural figures such as *Kweke* and *Kutatja*.

Deane-Drummond challenges Rahner's thinking in this area. She writes that in Rahner's Christology, the only difference between the figure of Christ and that of humanity seems to be that Jesus appears at that pivotal moment in history when the world turns towards God. Rahner does not, for Deane-Drummond, provide a strong enough argument for hypostatic union that focusses on the divine aspect and justifies the incarnation as a single event.³⁴⁸ This opinion finds a home among those who feel that Jesus has incarnated in this land many times, unknown by non-Aboriginal eyes.

³⁴⁷Karl Rahner, "The Incarnation", in *Rahner reader*, ed. McCool, 162.

³⁴⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 268.

This section reveals that these Aboriginal peoples can see hypostatic union at work in the community, every day. Whether to the level that Rahner and the Church hold, that highest example resulting in Jesus of Nazareth, is for the communities themselves to determine.

Catholic theologian Michael Trainor writes on how Jesus of Nazareth belonged to the earth and belonged to the human household, using cosmic imagery from the Lukan gospel but also using examples of the human. From the contemporary swaddling and other post-natal practices to the nature of the cloth, Jesus is a child treated with everyday human conventions.³⁴⁹ Just as the healed child, the sick Mrs Ryder, the teaching P, the gaoled Participant C, are all members of society imbued with everyday mores. People as products of culture do not preclude transcendence in all of us, as *Lumen Gentium* acknowledges.

Many non-Aboriginal writers have created valuable categorisations for Jesus and how he interacts across contexts. In his seminal work *Christ and Culture*, American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr describes Jesus' major virtues as love, hope, obedience, faith, and humility.³⁵⁰ He writes that these can be taken as the key to understanding his character and teaching.³⁵¹ Love is dealt with in the distinct section above.

Hope is offered in the healing stories of Mia, Mrs Ryder, and Participant C. Jesus' 'behaviour' to the people in the narratives offers compassion and restoration. They also state a constant presence of Jesus during these healing times.

³⁴⁹ Michael Trainor, *About Earth's child: an ecological listening to the gospel of Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 81-83.

³⁵⁰ Helmut Niebuhr, *Christ and culture* (USA: Harper & Row, 1951), pp15-27.

³⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and culture*, 27.

Obedience is found in the practices required to maintain a positive relationship with Jesus as *Kutatja Man*. *Kutatja Man* follows protocols as do the people over whom he watches. Jesus' obedient behaviour is found in relationship to others when he manifests as *Yile Neke*, for Troy. *Yile Neke* hides behind lights, to be revealed at the correct time.

Jesus' behaviours to people demonstrate faith through the healing stories, and through each participants' statement of Jesus position both with God and at the beginning of time. This faith is also found in the healer category revealed in the research.

Jesus' trait of humility is best illustrated through Mrs. Ryder's descriptions of Jesus as a stranger, walking among people seeking sustenance. Jesus assumes this role of a poor man and begs, to assess people's compassion, faith to their Christianity, and to provide opportunities to practice mercy and love. Humility is also seen in Troy's *Yile Neke* hiding behind lights, and in the Arrernte participants' Jesus, who walks with the subordinate little people in communion.

Niebhur's virtues of Jesus also resonate with the Jesus Christ living in the participants' communities, even if his categories about the way communities work with Christ cannot be exactly applied in this context.

It is clear that in the ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples view roles and attributes of Jesus, similarities can be gleaned. Certainly these are superficial examinations, but for economy of space, they at least form common understandings from which we can

agree that yes, we recognise this one Spirit, this representative of God, and all he does when he works in our lives, albeit lives and experiences expressed in vastly culturally-diverse ways.

When making links between these roles, and writing on Kurna Country, I am mindful that I am writing from a non-Aboriginal perspective, and this will unconsciously impact on my view as I cannot view from within a black perspective. I am addressing the roles Jesus plays, from my new understanding, not Jesus himself from a black perspective. He may look familiar to me due to the appearance of syncretism present around me, but I actively seek to compare and contrast imported western applications of character to the Aboriginal Christ when discussing his roles and distinguish from roles already established before colonisation. This can never be a proven or exhaustive task, but is instructive in learning how Jesus is viewed and hearing that same spirit at work.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Jesus' roles as Wisdom and the cosmic Christ

The Creator Spirit hunts with us, shares our food, camps with us, speaks our languages, dances our ceremonies, and sleeps by our fires. This Christ is not a foreigner, but an Aboriginal person like us.³⁵²

Rainbow Spirit Elders

We see the Wisdom pattern moving through these Aboriginal communities as Jesus, in his local name, makes a home among people, walking with them, opening their minds and nurturing body and soul, in all these stories.

In this chapter, I will discuss Wisdom in the participants' information, then turn to the cosmic Christ aspects of the participant material. While some aspects of Wisdom and the cosmic Christ have already been raised, I will discuss more widely elements that will resonate with participant material in Chapter Eight, illustrating the lens through which I was viewing that material.

Wisdom

As Edwards points out, Sophia does not remain simply a cosmic principle. In the Hebrew Testament, she is a way of speaking about the presence and action of God; in Proverbs, she is a cosmic figure, with God at the Creation of the universe; yet she comes to live among humanity.³⁵³ She builds her house among us and offers food (Prv 9:1-5) and Baruch tells of

³⁵² Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow spirit theology*, 90.

³⁵³ Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the natural world: exploring a Christian approach to ecology* (Mulgrave: Garratt Publishing, 2012), 63-66.

her appearing on earth and living with humankind ((Bar 3:37). In Sirach, Sophia sought a resting place on earth, and the Creator commanded her to make her home in Jerusalem (Sir 24: 3-11) where she again offers sustenance to humanity (Sir 24: 19-20). In the Wisdom of Solomon Sophia comes among humans to make us friends of God (Wis 7: 27-28).³⁵⁴ Edwards goes on to describe the ancient Wisdom literature that saw Sophia as one who was 'intimately involved with the whole work of Creation, who has now made her home among us and invited us to eat and drink at her table.'³⁵⁵ The early Christian community proclaimed that Wisdom has made her home among us in Jesus of Nazareth.

Yarning with the participants brings to mind the way in which Sophia aspects, sometimes in this way interpreted as Jesus, exist in their views of Jesus and the way Aboriginal Jesus has made his home with them. Wisdom aspects may be discerned in the way in which *Tjukabera*, *Kweke Man*, Jesus, and *Kutatja* interact with people. These representations mediate nurture and connection with the spiritual realm through song, directional imperatives, dance, and other Creator-oriented ceremonies. It is discernible to me, after this project, that Wisdom may manifest in Jesus, in *Tjukabera*, in *Kweke Man*, in *Kutatja*, and in a range of other guises. Edwards does note that "the identification of Jesus with Sophia points simultaneously towards a cosmic Christology and a theology of pre-existence and incarnation."³⁵⁶ While he writes of a singular incarnation, the premise can be applied to Jesus' spirit as Wisdom's presence in this continent as described by participants.

³⁵⁴ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 114-115.

³⁵⁵ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 115.

³⁵⁶ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 119.

Deane-Drummond writes that Jesus' attributes were also ones shared by God, namely, divine Wisdom.³⁵⁷ Frequently participants related Jesus activity back to God, acknowledging this bond of shared nature and relationship. Deane-Drummond sees Wisdom inherent in all Persons of the Trinity, but developed a Wisdom of the Cross theology around Jesus Christ to examine how Wisdom engages with such an event and how redemption manifests; in response to sin or love.³⁵⁸ While this project does not expand on the cross event, Deane-Drummond's work on a Trinitarian shape for Wisdom does have implications for the participants' worldview. For Deane-Drummond, in Trinitarian terminology, Wisdom is a characteristic of the Father working in Creation, and Wisdom in the Spirit makes beautiful what is established by the Son/Logos.

This synergetic approach is seen in Emma's contribution, not only in the way in which the three men appeared, but in the way she is able to assimilate Jesus' words with the reality of the creative activity of *Akurra*. It also may have implications for the little people; do they carry elements of Wisdom when Jesus walks with them?

In the previous chapter, Troy made reference to Jesus as being 'for wisdom'. This meshes with Deane-Drummond's placement of Jesus as Wisdom within a Trinitarian framework, and also links to her notation that for the Hebrew writers of Proverbs, human wisdom was about character formation, human responsibility, moral integrity and accountability to God, rather than to individual experiences.³⁵⁹ It will be recalled that Troy identified Jesus working this

³⁵⁷ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 111.

³⁵⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 58.

³⁵⁹ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 88.

way within his community, with everyone sharing food in what he named Christianity in a pre-invasion context.

Wisdom through Aboriginal Jesus expounds on the theme of setting a table for humanity. Emma and Emori talk about providing beds for people in need without judgement, and providing for vulnerable or hurt people. Mrs. Ryder discusses Jesus' imperative to give means of sustenance to those in want. P talked about ways to receive sustenance through Jesus and each other. Participant A holds regular prayer meetings, calling on Jesus to heal others and enter into her and heal herself. P's Kweke Man is the facet of Jesus who is the gift-giver; he likened this to the stations giving out food, as Sophia offered food (although without the colonial conditions; in P's words, the context is clearly a reference to sustenance). Participant C found happiness in being able to go to the shops with a new, healthier mindset and buy his own things – food was the example he gave, connecting back to the table. The Lukan food symbolism discussed in previous chapter also resonates with these experiences. The nurturing Jesus, profoundly experienced after healing experiences by Mia, also parallels with the Wisdom tradition: Wisdom prepares a banquet and invites people to partake of her bread and wine in Proverbs 9:5. Deane-Drummond points to Wisdom delighting in Jesus as the vine in Sirach 24:17, and connects the image of Jesus as the water of life to the river of Wisdom in Sirach 24:30-34.³⁶⁰ Jesus is present in acts of healing as the symbolic food of life, and actual food for life follows each event in the 'everyday' events of the cosmic Jesus' ministry for these people.

³⁶⁰ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 51.

Wisdom opening minds in readiness to receive the Spirit is also present in Troy's story, when his ancestor turned away from negative powers and began talking about a supremely powerful man from the sky, to the extent that his community thought he had gone mad. However Troy pinpoints him as the first Christian preacher in that area.

Edwards writes that Jesus 'embodies the compassion of God in his person, his words, and his actions. He offers healing and hope...'³⁶¹ Healing and hope were clearly illustrated in the roles not only of healer, but of strength and support. In these roles, he engages as the cosmic Christ in the communities.

Deane-Drummond writes that the term describing the Creation of all things through Christ presents him as a mediating agent, or sometimes mediator between humanity and God.³⁶² This is apparent when participants spoke of the way in which Jesus engages in their communities. Jesus is either beside or physically inside people during these events. He bridges the way between the salvific powers of God to effect human restoration through the human healer. In Emma's story of Jesus coming to teach and prophesy, we see Wisdom opening people to the Spirit. It is also apparent when hearing the way in which Jesus engages through appropriate guises at ceremony, prophesying, giving law, watching while people sleep, monitoring during cooking, and walking with humans and spirit people. He is constantly mediating between the Creator and humanity. Sometimes Aboriginal Jesus

³⁶¹ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 48.

³⁶² Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 105.

figures bring punitive measures to guide people back to law, and this is another way in which he maintains harmony between the Creator and people.

This activity on the part of Jesus finds a place in Deane-Drummond's perspective, adapted from von Balthasar, that evolutionary history may be viewed as theo-drama. This involves a stage, subjects, and action, and God in Christ becomes one of the players, not merely having oversight. It envisages a non-competitive scenario where God's freedoms and creature's freedoms may encounter one another, creating an unforeseeable sequence. In this model, the appearance of Christ assumes a dynamic presence of agency. Deane-Drummond writes that the coming of Christ can represent a pattern of divine Wisdom, emerging as wisdom/Logos in flesh from the Trinitarian presence that has existed in the theo-drama from the beginning of time.³⁶³

Edwards writes of interpreting Jesus as the Wisdom of God, pointing to Sophia passages in the Hebrew and New Testaments.³⁶⁴ I have previously mentioned Deane-Drummond's concurring material. Links to these can be found in the roles above.

In the New Testament, wisdom and the Spirit are associated with certain functions, so that in 1 Corinthians 12:8 the Spirit gives the gift of preaching and wisdom. Christ is also the one who endows the disciples with wisdom, as Luke 21:15 states. The real function of wisdom seems to be to guide humanity so that it acts in accordance with God's will. But wisdom as the Spirit is also capable of transforming human intentions so that they become more aligned with God's intention.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Deane-Drummond, "Christ and evolution" in *Zygon*, 2012, 528-529.

³⁶⁴ Denis Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God: an ecological theology* (NSW: St Pauls, 1995), pp45-51.

³⁶⁵ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 89.

Wisdom acting in these ways can be discerned in the roles and stories heard above.

Guidance of humanity appears in Troy's story as his ancestor was turned from evil towards Jesus and Mary. The healing women were guided to seek out those needing healing.

Participant B was guided to a new church and to healing. There is also evidence of the transformation of human intentions to align with God's. This can be heard when Participant C describes his change of heart and turning away from criminality, and when Emma and Emori describe parishioners who transform their lives after exposure to love and fellowship at church.

The participants have described Jesus, like Wisdom, as present at Creation, and with us all the time-making a home among us. The description of Wisdom in Wisdom 6:12-16 calls to mind P's description of *Kutatja*:

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.
To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,
and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care,
because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,
and meets them in every thought.

Kutatja watches over people always, as related by P and my anonymous sources, and communicates with humanity by leaving feathers or offering consequences. Wisdom sits at the gate; *Kutatja* watches people in their homes or hearths while they sleep. *Kutatja*

requires vigilance on his account, and is a constant known, guiding presence in people's lives.

Deane-Drummond writes that images of Jesus as light, bread and water, which echo those of Wisdom, are all bearers of revelation. Wisdom has been described as the revealer of secrets, and those who love Wisdom gain intimacy with God.³⁶⁶ I also note the Johannine symbolism of light, described in Troy's story in the preceding chapter, as a recurrent symbol across cultures that also connects to western Wisdom imagery.

Mrs Ryder's stories of the stranger, which also includes the water imagery, and the *Thukeri* story, incorporate revelation, or the coming of Wisdom. Wisdom as a transformative Jesus element that opens people's hearts for revelation, to prepare hearts and minds for reconciliation with God, is found in the story of the dying old man from Participant C, and also in Participant C's story about himself, and the way his heart, mind, and quality of life were transformed by Jesus Christ.

This quality is also evident in the 'damaged' people attending Emma and Emori's church, who gradually overcome emotional barriers and pain, and in the way the siblings aim to be role models for these. The quality is evident in the way Rhanee harnesses her faith in Christ to facilitate healing and promote interracial reconciliation.

³⁶⁶ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 50-51.

Wisdom is linked with the cosmic Christ as eternally present with God. An understanding of both these elements shone through participant knowledge. Mia's description of Ngkarte Utnege-Jesus-in everything is echoed in Edwards' writing that God is radically interior to everything God creates.³⁶⁷ For P, in addition to the creative roles *Kweke*, *Kutatja* and *Tjookajujera*, Jesus has a role with and alongside the spirit people, and the associated role of revealing himself to people through incarnation and signs of nature, just as Wisdom reveals God to humanity. Both of these appear to fit with his description of Jesus as *Ngkarte*, the messenger, physical being and image of God, engaging with humanity as a divine element in every aspect of their lives, Jesus as the spirit of the Creator, incarnate as *Tjookabujera*, inherent in ceremony and ritual. For P, Jesus bearing Wisdom, by all of these cultural names in the appropriate guise, is a constant messenger of revelation.

I will now discuss Jesus as the cosmic Christ, embedded in nature.

Jesus as cosmic Christ

Rahner writes extensively of Jesus Christ as present with God from the beginning of time, building on Genesis and John. Edwards and Deane-Drummond build on his work, exploring ecotheological aspects of the cosmic Christ that embed him in evolution and all physical parts of Creation. The participants' views firmly place Jesus as part of Creation, creative with the Creator in an ongoing sense, but also inherent in all physical parts of the environment.

³⁶⁷ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 33.

Deane-Drummond clarifies, writing, 'It would, however, be incorrect to suggest that Christ is simply explained by evolution. Rather, Christ is also in some way emancipated from time and space...'³⁶⁸

This resonates with several aspects of participant faith, especially the belief in multiple physical incarnations. This spatial and temporal emancipation would be the only condition under which such incarnations could manifest. The concept of these incarnations, so challenging for Catholic doctrine, agree with this metaphysical truth about Jesus Christ's position.

Edwards reminds us that Jesus is celebrated as the Word made flesh, but that the story of the Word does not begin with the life of Jesus; the Word was with God from the beginning, in a creative aspect (John 1:1-2).³⁶⁹

How is the Word expressed across Aboriginal cultures? The Word is expressed as the same as John's, present from the beginning of time, creating with the Father. Participant data indicates that for many, the Word enters our world as an inculturated being bearing the hallmarks of his Nazarene incarnation that transcend culture and are the ultimate marks of God's love.

³⁶⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 38.

³⁶⁹ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 55.

Karl Rahner describes the meaning of the universe as 'self-bestowal.' God creates a universe of creatures to give God's self to them in love. Examples of this include the Christ event and grace. For Rahner, Creation was always directed towards the Christ event.³⁷⁰

This leads me to reflect on Emma's discussion on limited power, and the ongoing Creation described by Western theologians and participants alike. This suggests to me, that the participants' view of Jesus 'coming and going, constantly', might make more sense. If Jesus is entering the physical world be it through P's incarnation or Mia and Buckskin's indwelling of people in a form of hypostatic union, that would seem to indicate a loving God continuously engaging with people, sending the Word through the Spirit that is universally acknowledged by all engaging with this project to be present and omnipotent. Wouldn't this foundational role of God's self-offering of love be ongoing, as Rahner attests is God's fundamental nature? Can there be, in the history of humanity, only one who was so responsive to God's offer in such a way as to achieve hypostatic union to the level of being identified with God and the Wisdom of God? The participants in this project deny this assertion, while not in any way having their faith compromised.

Interestingly, Rahner's views on God's love for the universe do not preclude the concept of multiple incarnations. He believed that extraterrestrials, with their own histories of salvation may exist, and if they did, then 'it cannot be proved that a multiple incarnation in different histories of salvation is absolutely unthinkable.'³⁷¹ Rahner can see that unknown planets may hold their own incarnation experiences. My participants might wonder why this

³⁷⁰ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 61.

³⁷¹ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 88.

cannot extend to unknown cultures. This would be an example of what Emma named 'restricting God's power.'

To return to Jesus as embedded in Creation: throughout the material, participants talked about God, or Jesus, being everywhere, walking around, walking with people, walking with spirit people, sometimes explicitly naming Country or Creation. Sometimes the answer to a Jesus question came back as a God answer. When I sought to clarify, it was explained to me that for these participants, they mean the same thing. Skye also found this phenomenon: in her research with Aboriginal women, 'to them Christ and God seemed one-and-the-same; there was no need to make distinctions.'³⁷² While I found evidence of clear distinctions, I also sometimes found this unity described by Skye. Where participants answered in this question framing context, I counted 'God' to include 'Jesus'.

This meant that every participant found Jesus everywhere, and part of Creation. This was evident not only in words but in the artwork. P built on the belief that Jesus belongs everywhere on Country, and described particular places that he comes to most. This resonates with Edwards' cosmic Christ, and the close relationship between Creation and incarnation, suggesting that God's self-communication in Creation is always directed towards the incarnation.³⁷³ The placement of Jesus 'everywhere' by participants also links him closely to Creation. As Creation is ongoing, this appears to generate or facilitate ongoing incarnation as historical events-in different guises.

³⁷² Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 30.

³⁷³ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 120.

Deane-Drummond wrote that Edwards' refusal to split Creation and incarnation emphasises the love of God for the world, as expressed in movements of both Creation and incarnation.³⁷⁴ This also seems to resonate with participant material; when speaking of the inculturated Jesus, the primary roles identified were of love. Even when the law is given, I was not given examples of punitive measures, with the exception of *Kutatja*, and even this figure could be appeased by caring appropriately for Creation. Each incarnate or other appearance of Jesus in the cultural contexts presented were linked to Country through location, reference, or the context he is placed in when each participant insisted that Jesus is everywhere on the continent and always has been.

The stories told to me often came from places of extreme natural beauty, where a strong connection between participant and Country was maintained. Urban participants expressed love of Jesus and his location there, even if colonisation and the Stolen Generations had effected disconnection of varying degrees from engagement with Country. This love of Country, or Creation, strikes a clear chord with Jesus of Nazareth. Edwards reminds us that the parables reflect a close observation of and delight in the natural world as a place of God; that they could only arise from one who looks on Creation with contemplation and love.³⁷⁵

Not only does Palestinian Jesus share placement on Country with Aboriginal Jesus, the participants describe engagement with the cosmic Jesus that resonates with Edward's ideas on human identity. Central to these is the tradition of *imago Dei*, and that we humans made

³⁷⁴ Deane-Drummond, *Creation through wisdom*, 58.

³⁷⁵ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 51.

in the image of God stand always before God's self-offering love; and the *imago Dei* transcends the human and applies to the risen Christ.³⁷⁶

Rahner, when discussing the significance of Jesus Christ from a transcendental perspective, appeals to a universal (transcendental) Christ-consciousness already present in every person which unfolds under the influence of the supernatural existential.³⁷⁷

Participant material suggests preconsciousness of both this *imago Dei* and a universal, transcendental Christ-consciousness. Images of beings engaging with Creation and the Creator, from animals, spirit people, people, and different guises of Jesus, are all acting to effect God's will-acts of inclusion and love. Formal ceremonies, such as described by P and an anonymous participant W, were widespread and even now continue to be held to tap into that inner quality and engage with the Creator. P articulated several modes of harnessing this consciousness to reach out to God, including singing, healing, nurturing the very young and the very old, and caring for nature/Creation. Other examples of human transcendence included Troy's grandfather and his visions with Mary and Jesus, Mia's inviting Jesus' spirit to be with her as she heals, Mrs. Ryder and Participant A's prayers, and the dream Participant C described as a message from Jesus.

Edwards also writes, from the background of his belief in God's continual Creation, that 'it is characteristic of God to create in an emergent and evolutionary way.'³⁷⁸ We have already

³⁷⁶Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 7.

³⁷⁷ Ackley, *The Church of the Word*, 44.

³⁷⁸ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 9-10.

seen that many participants believe Jesus appears throughout time, and usually linked to Creation. We have also seen that for some participants, Jesus emerges as cultural figures. While Rahner would probably not recognise Jesus in *Kweke Man*, or *Kutatja Man*, for example, their presence in community represents to these participants grace, and Jesus. As stated in the Methodology chapter, only those within a culture can accurately judge. Rahner's assessment of the presence of God and God-given grace is not remote from the experiences and descriptions of these participating people.

Deane-Drummond wrote about how Rahner saw the action of God in Creation and the action of God in the incarnation. These actions are the same process of self-giving and self-expression, but differentiated; there is an intrinsic affinity between the two.³⁷⁹

Christ is God's self-communication, the highest expression of the hypostatic union that we have seen occurs when God's self-offering meets human transcendence. Rahner's Christology claims that Jesus was divinised in a certain way, and suggests that the way in which Jesus accepted God's self-offer was unique, leading to the hypostatic union in Jesus Christ.³⁸⁰ Are these conditions present in the participants we have heard? It is impossible to gauge the way in which union occurs in this material, but the human transcendence element can certainly be observed to be present, as outlined above.

Edwards writes that 'in the Christ-event, (the) Spirit brings about the incarnation, sanctifying and transforming the humanity of Jesus, so that he can be ... the human face of God in our

³⁷⁹ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 40-41.

³⁸⁰ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 42.

midst.³⁸¹ For the participants, this Christ-event reoccurs, and will be reoccurring.

Sometimes, he is *Kweke* or *Kututja* Man, but sometimes, just like Jesus with his dual nature, he is the human face of God, seeking succour at Mrs. Ryder's table.

According to Edwards, discipleship of (the cosmic) Christ, the Wisdom of God, means following the way of wisdom, which includes loving respect for all God's creatures.³⁸²

Aboriginal societies are inherently structured to care for Creation, including the assignation of totems to ensure all species survive, and the maintenance of plants to ensure plant and water sustainability. The science that permeates this perspective is fundamentally spiritually-based, however. As we have heard, the land is commonly referred to as 'mother' by Aboriginal peoples.

Jesus appears to these participants as a son of Creation, part of the Country on which he is walking around, reaffirming that bond by putting his incarnated feet on the ground and leaving footprints of sand or water. He comes in and out of communities in whatever guise is appropriate, and his spirit is actively sought to be with people to fulfil roles similar to those recognised by non-Aboriginal Catholics.

Skye also found this belief very much evident in her study. She wrote, 'Australian Aboriginal Christian women are challenging the orthodox images of Jesus Christ by presenting an image of Christ that is One-with-Creation.'³⁸³

³⁸¹ Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 33.

³⁸² Edwards, *Ecology at the heart of faith*, 109.

³⁸³ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 46.

Love of Creation, as the caretaking practices described above portray, is a Wisdom trait; the Bible tells us that Wisdom, like Jesus for the participants, is everywhere in Creation (Wis 1:7, 12:1).

In an aside, Emma's description of witnessing to God's presence bears on Deane-Drummond's writing on the wonder and joy that can be experienced when engaging with Creation. There is an unbridled peace and happiness, and strong sense of God in every atom of the environment around you, when yarning and learning on Country. The cosmic Christ does not feel far away, and I no longer wonder at the casual familiarity with which many of the participants talk of Jesus, given their proximity to him when he is in every natural physical item you see and touch.

Rahner writes of transcendental Christology; in which the transcendental nature of Christ works in tandem with the historical aspect of Christ.³⁸⁴ This manifestation can be seen in these stories. Rahner wrote that '...a transcendental Christology takes its starting point in the experiences which man always and inescapably has...'³⁸⁵

Christology for these participants is clearly rooted in their experiences, and grace in the every day, as observed in the stories. Land, animals, language, and human behaviour specific to community frame the Spirit.

³⁸⁴ Rahner, *Foundations*, 208.

³⁸⁵ Rahner, *Foundations*, 208.

There has been diversity in this chapter around people's relationship to animals, and divinity associated with animals. Buckskin, a non-Christian, teaches that animals are included in moieties and regarded as much a sentient presence as humans, and that this is a social standard prevalent throughout Arnhem Land also.³⁸⁶ P and two Arrernte women, wishing to remain anonymous, talked about animals as divine messengers, or representing the Spirit.³⁸⁷

Deane-Drummond picks up on this when she talks about the ontological gap between humans and other creatures, and how humans constitute the image of God. In the tradition of Aquinas, she argues that there is more to image-bearing than the possession of reason, but that it requires also response to God's activity and knowing and loving God. She does not see animals as 'reduced humans', but argues that they are to be valued for their own skills and place in graced evolution. By considering the divine image in humans, we can consider how to regard animals as possessors of traits of divinely-bestowed personhood. Deane-Drummond suggests that we consider divine image not to be merely constituted by humanity, but by traits shared by the Logos. By identifying with Christ through his openness and vulnerability, we attain far more identification with the divine than through developing exceptional reasoning powers. By focussing on these traits, and participation in grace, Deane-Drummond sees that other animals share in God's likeness and are an important part of the 'overall evolutionary drama.'³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, 2 September, 2020.

³⁸⁷ Permission was given to quote this at the time of speaking, August 2018.

³⁸⁸ Deane-Drummond, "God's image" in *Zygon*, 2012, 934-945.

Within this paradigm, however, she does suggest gradations of image-bearing and personhood, and ponders moral agency in animals as indicators of traces of image-bearing. There is no hierarchy in her thinking, just diversity. Deane-Drummond acknowledges that this is a complex area that requires further development, but recognising attributes of personhood in animals, distinct from the explicit human role of image-bearing, increases respect and greater love for and with Creation. We are not cut off from animals, but connected to them in a divine way.³⁸⁹

The Catholic tradition of excluding animals from moral consideration due to a perceived lack of possession of morality does not appear within the Aboriginal examples taught to me.

Rahner felt that only human beings can be the expression of the Word, because 'no other spatio-temporal nature can reach the perfection of its own reality through personal union with God.'³⁹⁰ Deane-Drummond encourages us, while acknowledging the human role, to question the quality of these other natures, and reassess how we determine divine attributes. This approach allows us to view divinity in all of nature much more freely and comprehensively.

This fits into Buckskin's worldview where animals are respected, greeted and spoken to as just as important as humans. He acknowledges or smokes trees and rocks like people. They are sentient to Kurna people, and to be respected and acknowledged. This also recalls

³⁸⁹ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Are animals persons?*, webinar via Zoom, 11th June 2020.

³⁹⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Incarnation" in *Rahner reader*, ed. McCool, 145.

Troy's statement about his people having the God-given gift of connection to animals. They have a place in things, in Creation, as prominently as humans.

Buckskin's ontology allows for Deane-Drummond's rationale that all creatures have attributes of personhood, and this is developed by participants who then see animals as divine messengers. Deane-Drummond's perspective can tie in with existing Aboriginal acknowledgement that animals are explicitly tied to the Creator when acting as messengers, as articulated by P in the previous chapter.

Deane-Drummond's theories can be seen, developed and implemented systematically, in the examples from participants and by any protracted study of Aboriginal lore. In the case of this project, animals are allocated roles and acknowledged as importantly as people, as described by Buckskin.

Participants have said and restated that God, Jesus and the Spirit abides with and in them. They have also unanimously concurred that Jesus' spirit has been on earth since Creation. When Rahner writes of God's self-offer in the form of grace, he discusses Uncreated Grace, the primordial indwelling of the economical Trinity within the justified soul. Because of the inseparable connection between God's decrees of Creation and of the Incarnation, Uncreated Grace has been offered to humans since the beginning of human history as the grace of Christ.³⁹¹ Both these concepts gel with the Aboriginal understandings taught to me throughout this research and presented here. There also is the deeper dimension of the way

³⁹¹ McCool, *Rahner reader*, 174.

Jesus is tied to the land through Creation attached to these concepts, as discussed by J, Mia, et al.

Deane-Drummond ties these cosmic elements to Wisdom by pointing to Wisdom literature to explore the concept of a cosmic Christ:

Jesus as the 'icon' of God (Col 1:15), normally translated 'image' of God, does not mean image in the physical sense, but rather the preincarnate Christ or Christ in his glory, having the connotation of *manifestation* of God...the Creation of all things 'through him' (1:16) has the sense of Christ as a mediating agent, while in other contexts, the term is often used to express Christ as a mediator between humanity and God.³⁹²

Similarly, Skye found that 'Jesus is one with Creation and therefore one with the Land, Christ is the Land.'³⁹³

For Rahner, 'the decree of Creation ordered the universe from its beginning to the historical Incarnation of the Word. Thus the order of Creation has been under the grace of Christ from its very start.'³⁹⁴ Central to Rahner's Christology is the fact that Jesus was with God from the beginning. Aboriginal faith in Jesus' inhabitation of the world from Creation is in agreement with Rahner. Their indivisible association of Jesus and land, as one who is creative and imbues Creation with Godself, is not expressed in this way unique to Aboriginal cultures for whom Creation is pivotal in everyday life. But this pivotal role of Creation, and Jesus in that Creation every day, can be found in Rahner's concepts on God experienced in the everyday.

³⁹² Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 105.

³⁹³ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 217.

³⁹⁴ Rahner, "Incarnation", in *Rahner reader*, ed. McCool, 166.

An understanding of Jesus tied to evolutionary Creation, and the roles in which participants view Jesus are loosely universal across Catholic and participant circles, but provide a backdrop against which to examine ways people on the songline inculturate their Christ.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Black Jesus

The whitefellas were preaching to us what we were already practising, only they couldn't see that.³⁹⁵

Boori Monty Pryor

Birri-gubba/Kunggandji author

Through the roles described in the previous chapters, Jesus is inculturated in various communities. Inculturation ties together all the elements examined above to describe Jesus living within communities; expressed in language, tradition, lore, and law. In this chapter, I will discuss inculturation, and how the participants in this project see Jesus within their cultural context. After a discussion around meanings of inculturation, I will continue listening to Aboriginal voices on this topic.

Inculturation of Jesus Christ

The second half of the research question asks, *how is the figure of Jesus inculturated in Aboriginal communities?* Inculturation links to Vatican II:

The Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Pryor, *Maybe tomorrow*, 189.

³⁹⁶ "Gaudium et spes," Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, Vatican, December, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, 58.

This is an avenue, also expressed in the Papal address and *Lumen Gentium*, through which non-Aboriginal audiences can attempt to learn about how the Church looks to these other ancient patterns of living.

There have been many forms of inculturation identified over the years, and I will briefly discuss three main approaches that impact on or are present in this project:

1. Jesus was introduced to Aboriginal communities and made local (local theologising)
2. Jesus was already known as an ancestor then was melded to Christianity as a partial syncretism (Skye's approach)
3. Jesus was already distinctly known pre-invasion and then recognised in the Christian story (most of the participants in this project, and supported by Graham et al).

Local theologising

'Inculturation' is a term often associated with the method known as local theologising. Local theology refers to a theological methodology that attempts to describe or construct theologies within a particular culture, free of Western impositions. Theologian Fr Robert Schreiter coined the term 'inculturation' that sits within this project's results, explaining it as:

...the dynamic relation between the Christian message and culture or cultures; an insertion of the Christian life into a culture; an ongoing process of reciprocal and critical insertion and assimilation between them...³⁹⁷

³⁹⁷ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 17.

As a significant contributor to this field, Schreiter has dedicated many works to the relationship between theology and its expression in a range of sociocultural contexts.³⁹⁸

Schrieter acknowledges that this methodology is greatly underpinned and informed by Rahner and his experiences of cultural diversity impacting on the Church after Vatican II.³⁹⁹ He explains that Rahner acknowledges the vast range of religious contextualisation of the experience of God: that all religious behaviour has need of multiple mediations, but it also springs from multiple motivations; all however united in the yearning for God: 'Karl Rahner holds that alongside all these variegated psychological and social relations lies a deep-seated need for completion and salvation to be found only in God.'⁴⁰⁰

Skye, following, builds on local theologising by providing knowledge and motivations from inside the local culture.

Skye and Christ as partial syncretism

I write that Skye's approach is a partial syncretism, because while Skye sees that introduced Christianity arrived and blended with existing spirituality, Jesus' spirit was always here, and so the arrival of Christ with colonisers was not an entirely new concept.

On the surface, (US) Aboriginal involvement with Christianity may appear to be an example of religious syncretism. Syncretism can be described as 'both a process of

³⁹⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Foreword" in *Constructing local theologies*, ix.

³⁹⁹ Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, xi.

⁴⁰⁰ Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 160-161.

acculturation and the resulting coalescence of different cultures...the fusion of religious forms and beliefs.⁴⁰¹

Skye's approach is distinct within straightforward syncretism in that it transcends fusion and recognises the introduced Christ as already present. Skye works with her own concept of 'inculturation' as a major theme emerging from her research, seeing Christ inculturated to the point of melding with ancestor spirits, including the ultimate Divine Creator God.

Skye adopts the term 'inculturation' in terms of a dynamic relationship between Christianity and culture, but she inverts Schreiter's other criteria. To Skye, Aboriginal communities inculturate Christ by receiving the Western Christian message, measuring it against existing Aboriginal cultural and spiritual beliefs, and articulating Christologies from within, rather than a process being applied from without.

Skye's use of the term inculturation allows autonomy by the culture in question – no longer a host culture but a generating culture – and realises Schreiter's dynamic interaction between Christ and culture by allowing a new Christ figure to emerge. Schreiter refers to this outcome as hybridism, and is noncommittal as to its positivity.⁴⁰²

Skye writes:

This inculturation process means inculturation theology itself is challenged in numerous ways, two major practices are that these women seek a non-imperialistic, non-hegemonic inculturation theology that: (1) does not acknowledge superiority in

⁴⁰¹ William Madson, "Religious Syncretism" in *Handbook of middle American Indians* vol 6, ed. Manning Nash (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1967), 369.

⁴⁰² Robert Schreiter, *The new Catholicity: theology between the global and the local* (Orbis Books: New York, 1997), 73-78.

the universal Church and theology, and (2) allows them to possess Christ fully within their context. And paramount to this possession is the inculturation of faith, not doctrine.⁴⁰³

Skye's Christology is Creation- and land-centred, based more on faith, calm, and peace, than doctrine. Jesus' spirit is melded to ancestral spirits and has been here since Creation, is actually one with Creation, with the Father. Skye inculturates Jesus through insertion into culture, but blends this with knowledge her people already have about Jesus' spirit. Skye, whose work draws from women's wisdom, explains that studies are usually conducted by expatriate males, with results accordingly offensive to the initial group.⁴⁰⁴ 'Hence, we believe the only true interpretation of our individual tribal cultures can come from Indigenous membership.'⁴⁰⁵

Schineller, among other authors, understands the ... word 'incarnation' to be 'the most directly theological word to express the meaning of inculturation.'⁴⁰⁶ Schineller said (Christ) did not consciously indigenise or inculturate, but instinctively took part fully in the culture he was born into, and then critically affirmed ... that culture in the light of the Spirit.⁴⁰⁷ This cultural incarnation can be understood in upcoming participant understanding of the Black Jesus.

⁴⁰³ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 3-5.

⁴⁰⁴ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 138.

⁴⁰⁵ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 138.

⁴⁰⁶ John Waliggo, "African Christology in a situation of suffering", in *Faces of Jesus in Africa* ed. Robert Schreiter (SCM: London, 1992), 170-172 cited in *Yiming calling*, 138.

⁴⁰⁷ Waliggo cited in *Yiming Calling*, 139.

Skye found that some groups she interviewed inculturated Christ, but unanimously all her interviewed groups understood that Jesus had 'pre-incarnated' before Christian colonialism came to Australia. 'The belief that Christ was with God...and the Ancestors...and our people from the beginning of Creation, is also unanimous.'⁴⁰⁸ She states that as a result, 'the 'incarnation of Christ' aspect of White western inculturation theology is inaccurate...'⁴⁰⁹

This description of erroneous understanding of incarnation emerged when I engaged with the participant material. For many of my participants, their understanding encompassed Skye, but went further to articulate activity and personae of Jesus' incarnations.

Pre-invasion Jesus known and recognised

Graham comments that because God is encountered most closely in the human heart, through Jesus' incarnation, God is already present in indigenous cultures and recognised as such.⁴¹⁰ Local theologising explores this divine expression. This has been demonstrated among the Aboriginal writers in the literature review. Graham et al also state that this methodology demonstrates that theology is culturally, temporally, and spatially located.⁴¹¹

Rather than implanting Christ into a particular culture, the work of theological reflection may be understood as more of a 'treasure hunt', seeking to bring to the surface signs of God's grace and activity present in the midst of culture.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁸ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 142.

⁴⁰⁹ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 145.

⁴¹⁰ Graham et al, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 215-216.

⁴¹¹ Graham et al, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 200.

⁴¹² Graham et al, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 202.

Lest this appear too simplistic, they go on to explain that this model seeks to worship in partnership with local Christianities, not change them; indeed that the Church's role, to proponents of this model, is to nurture Christianity within specific cultural contexts, and that the Church should seek not to change local theologies but to incorporate them into itself to fulfil its incarnational calling.⁴¹³ This of course speaks to the Papal address underpinning this thesis.

Graham, Walton and Ward write that local theology is:

“based upon the conviction that the Christian gospel does not exist in abstract form but is most authentically encountered when it is incarnated within specific cultural contexts...”⁴¹⁴

These examination of ‘specific cultural contexts’, read with the Papal address’ mandate to seek Christ in Indigenous cultures, supports the seeking of Christ within Aboriginal communities in their diversity and without imposing external definitions on the participants’ material.

The participants I this project have described several facets of Jesus Christ in their communities so far. After a visual sample of community inculturation, I will examine further material that speaks about Jesus as an inculturated figure, seeking, as described by Graham et al, to hear about Jesus Christ from within Aboriginal culture.

⁴¹³Graham et al, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 202.

⁴¹⁴Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, & Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 370.

The material discussed in the forthcoming chapter describes inculturation of the Christ figure partially in the way conceptualised by Skye, as she sees Jesus Christ's presence in the continent from the beginning. Jesus is not merely a new, introduced figure that has been melded with existing figures. Sometimes he is compared to, or melds with, cultural figures, but for the participants in this project, inculturation is taken a step further. Jesus is inculturated as organic to, indigenous to, each nation explored, through his cosmic existence with God from the beginning of Creation. Elements of introduced Christianity are amalgamated with community tradition, inescapably through colonisation, but the foundational Christ figure has its genesis in each participant's national Creation and culture. I will listen for names, types of roles, relationships, Wisdom, and cosmic aspects. In this sense, a figure organic to communities, he is not inculturated at all, but just a man of culture; or, Black Jesus.

Images of inculturation

Two cultures CAN hold each other.⁴¹⁵

Margaret Kemarre Turner

Arrernte (Akarre) Catholic woman

Aboriginal churches across the dingo songline feature a black Jesus being born, smoked, baptised, painted, sung to by black Mary, and healing.

I close this section with images of inculturation taken from two communities along the dingo songline. Figures 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, 8.6 and 8.7 are from the chapel in the Otherway Centre, a branch of the National Australian and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council on Kurna Country.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, 220.

⁴¹⁶ Permission to use these images given by Aunty June, The Otherway Centre, December 2020.



Figure 8.1: *Fourteenth Station of the Cross*. The Stations of the Cross feature frames worked in dot painting (just discernible underneath). The congregation is largely made up of Ngarrindjeri people; Jesus in the stations wears a Ngarrindjeri facial design in ochre. I note that he appears to be looking at the natural landscape through the confines of the human building. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.2: *The tabernacle*. The tabernacle with Aboriginal designs, including on the host and chalice. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.3: *Ngarrindjeri Madonna and Child*. Stained-glass window detail. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.4: *Altar candle*. Altar candle featuring a cross decorated with dot painting. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.5: *Clapsticks*. Clapsticks lie next to the missals. The children particularly enjoy using these during music. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.6: *Chapel*. The chapel features the burned wood design on the tabernacle, lectern, and the crucifix featuring a Black Jesus. The altar candles are bound in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, and the altar cloth is patterned in Aboriginal art. A coolamon⁴¹⁷ sits next to the patterned sanctuary chair. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.7: *Back window*. Detail from the chapel's back window. Author's own image, December 2020.

⁴¹⁷ Coolamon is the generic English-imposed word for this vital wooden artifact, used to carry anything from berries to water to babies to leaves for smoking ceremony. On Kurna Country it is called a *kuru*.

Figures 8.8, 8.9, 8.10, 8.11, 8.12, 8.13 and 8.14 are from the Catholic Church in the *Ltyentye Apurte* Community (Santa Teresa), south-east of Alice Springs.⁴¹⁸



Figure 8.8: *Creation*. One of the artists explained that this is the Creation of the heavens and earth. She pointed out to me that the Creator's hands are a woman's hands, as the Creator is male and female. Author's own image, December 2020.

⁴¹⁸ Permission to publish these murals here was granted by the community verbally at the time of the visits and later via Sr Liz Wiemers through the parish office's email.



Figure 8.9: *Creation of the animals*. This image was described as the Creation of the animals. During my times in this area I heard stories of Jesus coming as a messenger as a willy wagtail, which is a special bird for the community. As an aside, my Kurna friends tell me that the willy wagtail is also considered a messenger in their country, further down the dingo songline. Many Arrernte and Wadeye people also confirmed that animals can act as holy messengers, including Participant D. She does not wish her story published, but it represents Jesus as a bird. Author's own image, December 2020.

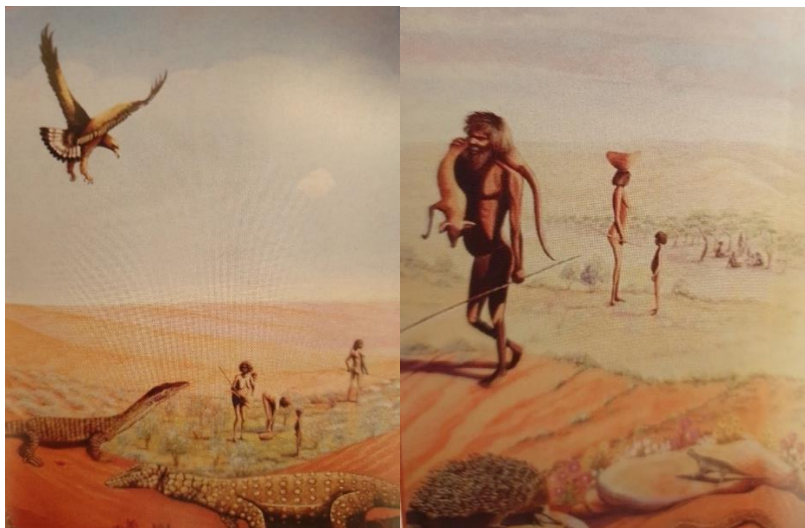


Figure 8.10: *The first people*. The first ancestors live in the Arrernte desert in harmony with Creation, following their laws. Subsequent generations live and thrive, knowing their belonging to the country. (artists' explanation). Author's own image, December 2020.

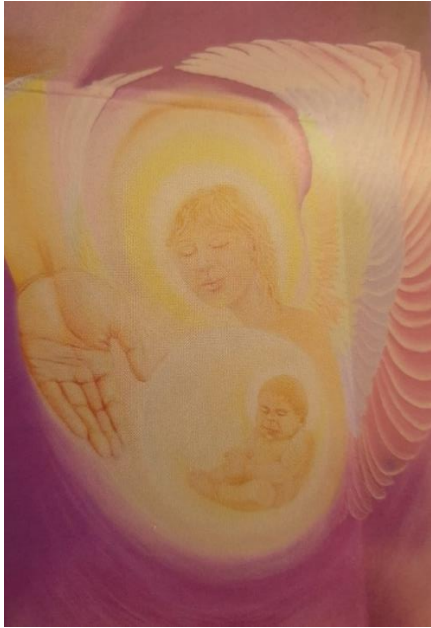


Figure 8.11: *Jesus*. I was given no explanation other than that Jesus is growing. Author's own image, December 2020.



Figure 8.12: *Jesus is born*. This was explained to me as the women, an angel, and God watch over the newly-born Christ child. When I asked if the three figures were the wise men, I was told no. I have yet to verify this. It remains a stunning nativity scene. Author's own image, December 2020.

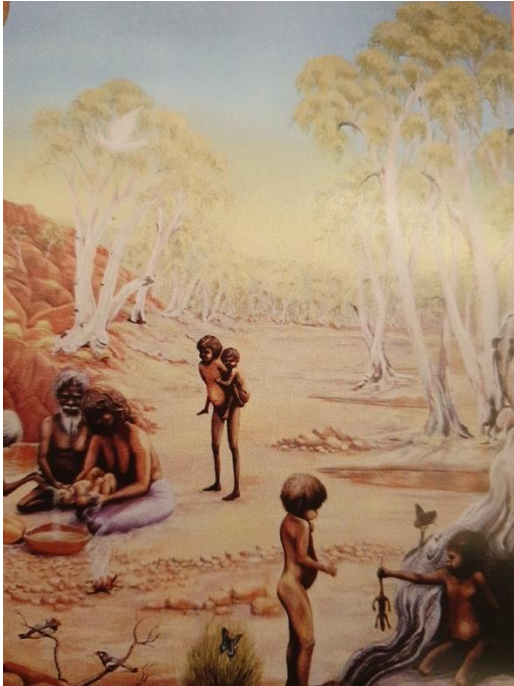


Figure 8.13: *Jesus in a smoking ceremony*. Another scene of Jesus' infancy; it was explained to me that he is being smoked as part of a cleansing ceremony. I also was told to look at the far right-hand side of the picture. Spirit people can be glimpsed, sharing significant moments with Jesus. This ties in with descriptions of spirit people and their relationship to Jesus as described by participants from this region. Author's own image, December 2020.

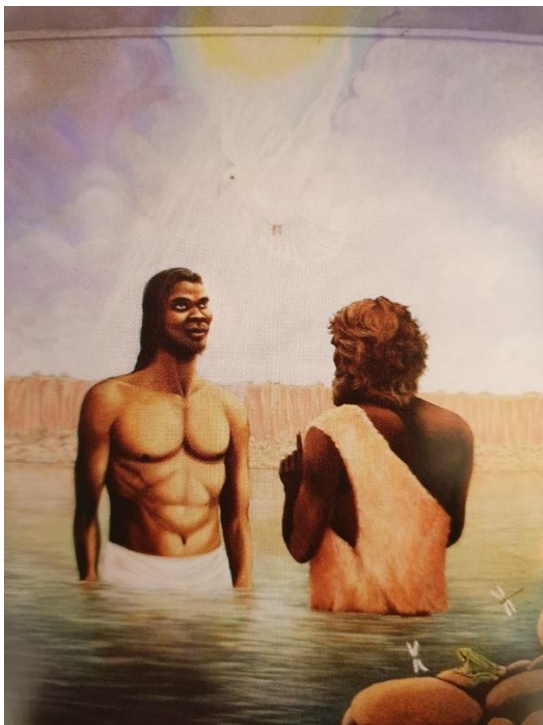


Figure 8.14: *Jesus' Baptism*. Jesus is baptised as the Spirit shines down on him. Author's own image, December 2020.

These representations point to something deeper than fusion of cultures or incorporation of presented or enforced doctrines. As explored in the previous chapter, to every participant, Jesus, and the roles explained to me, existed and continues to exist in the Aboriginal world independent of introduced gospel. While syncretism is apparent, it is inculturation in Skye's definition of the Christ figure that we are truly observing for these participants; that is, inculturation involving pre-colonial influence then populated with specific detail as determined by participants.

Of course, in a continent as aggressively missionised as Australia, there are elements of introduced Christianity.⁴¹⁹ In many cases these elements are the observable (to an outsider) presence such as Aboriginal art on Catholic artefacts or translated Bibles. However the case for an inculturated Christ, in the sense posited by Skye and beyond to an organic Christ, can be discerned in upcoming examples from the project materials.

Multiple Incarnations

Throughout the yarning sessions, a recurrent theme arose that warrants its own discussion. It is that of the concept of multiple incarnations, that has been touched upon already. In Catholic or indeed many Christian circles, the idea is sensitive, but in a project committed to learning authentic perspectives on Jesus Christ, the area cannot be ignored, accepted as it is among participants.

⁴¹⁹ O'Sullivan, *Faith, politics, and reconciliation*, 2-23.

Troy's Marian story drew a distinction between Jesus' father, who is not a man, and Jesus, who is a man. This can be interpreted as another physical incarnation of Jesus, confirmed by Troy at the end of the story. Mrs. Ryder describes Jesus as engaging with community as one who can receive food, and eat and drink.

Emori argues that the nature of God implies that he would give his son universally:

I think that (a human Jesus) would have come in (to the Adnyamathanha community) whenever. It's really up to him. I don't think God would be that selfish. He would have sent somebody. (Palestine) could just be the first place that it was documented.

In response to the idea that Jesus has incarnated in other places, Emma implies that Aboriginal people have been responding to this type of incarnation longer than any other culture:

When you had Aboriginal culture, when (missionaries) came in and they were saying, this is what you need to do, they only had that one tunnel vision of Christianity, whereas Aboriginal people had been dealing with Christianity since Creation.

Emori's comment is reminiscent of Rahner's theory of the universality of grace, and also Rahner's description of God's eternal self-offering to humanity. These young people, who have never read Rahner but who are rich in their nation's teaching, have pinpointed the heart of these two widely-renowned theories of the prolific theologian. Of course, the biggest variance is their faith in Jesus being involved with the Adnyamathanha community throughout time.

Emma continues:

Yeah, it says in the Word that he gives everybody a chance. So you know, it's unfair to say that Jesus came in and only the people over in Jerusalem are saved and everybody else in the world is going to Hell. 'Oh sorry, you just have to wait for colonisation before you can get saved.'

God wouldn't have been like that. He's a gracious God, he's a merciful God. So there's no way He would have been like 'Pffft! You're going to Hell. My Word's not there yet.' And it says in the Bible in Psalms 113:4, it talks about God being a God of all nations. So if He is a God of all nations, it doesn't say God's just a God of the Middle East. He knew the world, He created it. So if He is a God of all nations, He's a God of everyone. If He's a God above heaven and earth, and that's what it says, in that Word, then He would be able to be there.

So for us as humans, sometimes we find it really hard and even colonisers back in the day they found it very hard to understand the concept of omnipresence and omnipotent, how God's an omnipotent God, an all-powerful God, then He can do whatever He wants. And if He's an omnipresent God He can be wherever He wants. So who's to say that he was just in the Middle East and that was only happening? Yes it was a starting point where Christianity was introduced to the world, but it doesn't mean that it was only there. God wouldn't have left out His people, because we are all His children because we are heirs of the Father.

He says in His Word, you know in Revelations, that he will come back to every town, to everyone who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, that everybody has to see him, and has to have known about him once before he comes back. Otherwise, he's an unjust God. And therefore, if he's an unjust God, then he's not God at all.

So us restricting him, that's heresy in itself. So you restrict God's power, put limits on a limitless God, and that's what we do as humans because we can't understand the concept of something being all-powerful. It's too much for us to handle so we put restrictions on things...

Emma and Emori's faith is such that the possibility of more than one Incarnation is easy. For them, it is a lack of faith to imply otherwise.

In the previous chapters, P explained that the spirit of what non-Aboriginal people call Jesus Christ manifests according to community need. Thinking about P's potential perception of

Jesus of Nazareth as another facet of this same cosmic Christ, I questioned P about the distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ:

So we've never separated the fact that, well hang on, Jesus was only born two thousand years ago, so he actually only became human two thousand years ago. We would argue that he has always been. And that the stories that we have in our culture is that those footprints, we have footprints of God walking beside us. Story songs, and God walking beside us in the sand with us.

In response to this statement, I asked if Jesus is incarnate and has been incarnate among Aboriginal nations, to which he replied:

Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. (nodding emphatically).

I explained to P that I had been taken to places and shown where spirit people walk, and was told that at the right times you can see the footprints of spirit people. P affirmed this and stated that Jesus is one of them, walking with them.

Yes. Incarnate and human and lived amongst and with the people. Yep. Who therefore walked through the Garden of Eden and saw that when Adam and Eve heard someone in the Garden – who was that? Because there's no reference to God the Father being incarnate human. You see?

This was to me a very interesting Biblical argument for P's assertion that Jesus walks among the people and always has done. I also found it a gracious acceptance of foreign sacred story by P's community, and recognition of theological truth, when Aboriginal sacred stories were and are dismissed by white communities for so long. I then asked P about the Bible as a product of the people that wrote it, and the difference between literal and theological truth.

...yeah that makes sense and I know exactly what you're saying. But that makes perfect sense to us as Indigenous people. Because that's what we believed. Hang on, he was here. He's been here. And he's been guiding us and speaking truth into our lives, into our communities, into our families long before the Christians came.

My next question was, what would be the medium for imparting that kind of knowledge?

Well, more ways than one. And the Bible, the Old Testament, has all of these. Speaking face-to-face. There are stories of God's spirit speaking face-to-face with the people. There's stories of responses, so physical signs of response so rain, fire, food, a whole range of different things. As a direct result of a dance or a song or a prayer. Not a prayer. A song or a dance or a ceremony. Which has brought life to the country. You know, and that's Jesus himself. It's lifegiving... and that all goes back to Jesus' comments when he was on Earth, you know...I come to give life and give it abundantly.

He's been doing that since time immemorial...Of course, we didn't refer to him as the name Jesus, because that's a very, you know, (western) name. He was always the spirit of our Creator and a messenger. Different words for a messenger. But...I guess there's two things I'm reading into it when you ask that question.

The first one is, do we believe that he is omnipresent? One hundred percent. By he, I mean, for us, *palunya* is the word that means he or she. It means them; not gender-specific. So there was no 'Jesus was a man' kind of notion. Because Jesus is a spirit, a being.

But the first one was that being omnipresent meant that we knew and understood that his spirit was on our country, and on other people's country, and not exclusive to that.

Again the Catholic universality of spirit is recognised by Aboriginal community as a basic doctrine.

However, the second part to that is that there are particular places on country where that spirit frequents more often and resides, which comes down to that – sacred sites. So the sacred sites have always been about where the connections were made between the ancestors and the spirit. The conversations – a bit like the burning bush in the Bible, Moses and so on and so forth. Where those interactions took place were those sacred sites. They weren't public areas. You know, the church would talk about them as being like the inner sanctum, the tabernacle, kind of thing. We've had our tabernacles, we've got our tabernacles, we've got our sacred sites on community and

in the bush. And that's where I would say that Jesus' footprints would be and have been, if that makes sense.

I responded that it does, because he had talked before about Jesus incarnating here and there, and walking with people; that his footprints are a sign of physical manifestation.

Yep. Yep. Yeah. And not coming and going but being there presently, constantly.

This comment led me to reflect on Jesus' promise to return and the long-awaited Second Coming, anticipated ecumenically across Christian communities in the Pentecostal tradition. P's conviction begs the question; has this coming already been occurring in diverse communities, undocumented by the Church?

Another area of interest in the way P inculturates Jesus is his description of Jesus as physically incarnating as different spirits. This was reminiscent of hypostatic union, but P takes it a step further. I asked if he meant that Aboriginal Jesus can be equally human and equally spirit:

Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Hundred percent. Jesus gave people his blessing to be that. But he's the source. My theological head tells me isn't that what Jesus conquered when he rose from the dead on the cross to give people eternal life?

Because time is cyclical for P, I reflect that the cross event could therefore have given people that ability regardless of its fixed point in time for non-Aboriginal Catholics. I also wonder whether P is referring to the divinisation of all humanity that occurred through the cross event, according to Rahner, or whether the inference is that people can achieve the highest level of transcendent offering and acceptance that Catholics have only seen before

in Jesus of Nazareth. Buckskin's comments in the previous chapter would seem to support this, as people take on the roles of the spirit influencing them.

P describes Jesus' being as one that is spiritual and encompassed by the supreme Creator, communicating through nature and as divine messenger, but also constantly incarnating and walking with people as a human being. Deane-Drummond's work connects with P's comments about Jesus walking with people. Discussing the resurrection, she writes:

Hope in the resurrection is a counter-cultural hope that points beyond itself to new beginnings, perhaps a different order of space and time that have not yet been identified by contemporary physical science. Jesus' resurrection appearances ... however sceptical we might be tempted to be about the literalness or otherwise of these accounts ... demonstrate that the resurrection life is not the same as life on earth, but it has some continuity with it.⁴²⁰

There is some point of potential conversation here between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians, given the belief, such as that articulated by P, in an incarnate physical Jesus walking with communities. The nature of this 'resurrection life' would be a fascinating exploration to make given further opportunity.

I have not in this project pursued the implications of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for participants. It was not something that anyone referred to, discussing either his spiritual presence here eternally, or regular incarnation as a visible, Aboriginal being. I have subsequently discussed this issue with some participants informally, who feel that Jesus of Nazareth's life was one of many incarnations experienced globally, including throughout their cultures.

⁴²⁰ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 155.

This stands in direct contrast to Rahner, of course. He is emphatic that the true teaching of Christianity states that 'God lays hold of matter when the Logos becomes flesh.'⁴²¹ Edwards takes this a step further, claiming that 'Jesus is the product of the evolutionary history of matter. He is the self-transcendence of the world of matter reaching out to God.'⁴²² These are in agreement with P's assertion that Jesus incarnates in his communities, however for Rahner, and indeed the entire Catholic Church, this self-transcendence of the cosmos is the absolute self-communication of God in its highest and final stage.⁴²³ In contrast, P does not see any reason why the Christ has to be limited to one historical manifestation in physical form; as indeed did Emma or Emori.

Edwards writes:

There is a ... connection between grace in all of us and incarnation in Jesus: the effect of the incarnation on the humanity of Jesus occurs through the same grace given to us. It happens through the very same reality that is offered to us all, God's self-communication in grace. God's giving of God's self to all of us, and the incarnation in Jesus Christ, can only be understood together, and they both occur through the same reality, grace.

Edwards distinguishes between grace in other humans and grace in Jesus; we are recipients of grace, whereas grace in Jesus functions to identify this one human as identified with God's self-offering to the universe.⁴²⁴

⁴²¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith*, 196.

⁴²² Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 83.

⁴²³ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 83.

⁴²⁴ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 86.

However, his understanding of grace events occurring within the same reality for Jesus of Nazareth and for us, has implications for P's beliefs. Is God, and his grace, to be limited to one historical event and one culture? And how are we to know this definitively, when for these participants they recognise the incarnation of the Christ in their stories and experiences? Cannot other humans respond to God's grace in definitive, transcendent grace events?

Edwards asserts that 'the humanity of Jesus is eternally significant, not just for God's relationship with human beings, but for God's action at the heart of cosmic and evolutionary history.'⁴²⁵ Participant description of Jesus being with people is fundamentally aligned with this statement. Jesus revisits his humanity in a physical sense again and again, re-establishing and maintaining relationship and law (particularly as we saw with *Kutatja*), and throughout these contacts is actively recognised as God's, or the Creator's messenger, one with nature and Creation from the beginning.

Edwards recognised Jesus Christ as:

...the absolute guarantee that the ultimate self-transcendence of Creation into God will succeed... Jesus is the self-transcendence of the universe into God. But God's self-communication is addressed to human beings in their common history.⁴²⁶

Rahner's belief is that Jesus is the initial movement towards this transcendence towards God. The participants' material indicates an awareness that Jesus is indeed the self-transcendence of the universe into God. He mediates law and judgement. He creates, and

⁴²⁵ Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 127-128.

⁴²⁶ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 106-107.

provides strength and succour. He walks with people as a human, imparting God's love and God's healing, while recognised as an elevated being as one with the Creator. But this is not limited to Rahner's initial and so far only incarnation.

Crucially, the Aboriginal experiences related during this project are that Jesus is a loving, *ongoing* incarnating being in these communities. While Rahner sees Jesus as the absolute Saviour, this does not mean that salvation starts with him in a temporal sense, rather that salvation and grace are coextensive with world history and Jesus is the initial historical point.⁴²⁷ These points occur on a constant basis for the participants.

Edwards says of Rahner's work:

In this saviour, there is on one hand the irreversible self-communication of God to creatures. And on the other hand there is the definitive human acceptance of this communication. When both of these occur in Jesus of Nazareth, there is present in human history an absolute self-communication on both sides.⁴²⁸

It is not clear from participant contributions whether their incarnations of Jesus occur in this way, or whether his spirit knowingly manifests in a way distinct from his life as Jesus of Nazareth. But from the way participants discuss working with his spirit in the manner of the apostles to involvement in human activity, certainly the elements of human awareness of responding to God's offer are there, as demonstrated by P.

⁴²⁷ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 107.

⁴²⁸ Edwards, *God of evolution*, 107.

P's examples have included the physical safety and security of the community group, protocols surrounding cooking (life) and ceremony, and spiritual nourishment. In a subsequent conversation, he explained that the spirit of what non-Aboriginal people call Jesus manifests according to community need.

Edwards reminds us that the incarnation (referring to Jesus of Nazareth) 'is about God embracing this created world, the world of matter and living creatures, and doing so eternally.'⁴²⁹ The spirit of Jesus manifesting for the participants to engage in ceremony, to bring rain, to provide food, to heal, to find missing children's spirits; all is incarnation, for these participants, reconcilable with the concept of God embracing the created world on a highly physical and social level, just as it occurred with Jesus of Nazareth. This spirit manifesting, in P's words, strikes a contrast with Deane-Drummond:

The resurrection appearances of Christ all have a common thread, often a failure by the disciples to fully recognise who he was. Yet there was something different about him that clouded their perception. The continuity remained, for it was through his actions or words or gestures that they came to see the truth.⁴³⁰

As a disciple, P clearly discerns which is the spirit of Jesus, and even in which guise he is manifesting; or, resurrecting. P asserts that the spirit of Jesus physically manifests, to heal, leave feathers, leave footprints, be seen. These appearances are genuine and recognised explicitly by P, as are the criteria listed by Deane-Drummond. Jesus' actions and words alter to suit community need, but are consistent in their appearance.

⁴²⁹ Edwards, *Jesus and the natural world*, 35.

⁴³⁰ Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and wisdom*, 164.

Rahner was firm in his belief in one true Incarnation of Christ, and saw theories connecting Christ solely with Spirit as gnostic in nature, because Christ becomes flesh.⁴³¹ Rahner saw that the action of God in Creation is as the action of God in incarnation; both are “two movements and two phases of the one process of God’s self-giving and self-expression, although it is an intrinsically differentiated process.”⁴³²

This is in contrast to the beliefs these participants present. It can be seen that faith in the spirit of Jesus operates concurrently with faith in Jesus incarnating at different times and places. This does not, reading the participant material as a whole, detract from any faith in Jesus of Nazareth. He is one revelation among several. P, Emma, Emori, Claire, Mrs. Ryder and Mia in particular affirmed the ability of Jesus to become man and move through their respective cultures many times; not metaphorically as in the Irish triune prayer, but literally, to be engaged with physically.

Deane-Drummond described Rahner’s view of hypostatic union between God and humanity:

...from God’s side, there is absolute self-communication, while from the world’s side, there is self-transcendence. Rahner asks if Christ’s incarnation represents a higher level of self-transcendence of the world or the way divinization of a creature needs to take place if such self-transcendence is to take place at all. He opts for the latter, so that the incarnation is a singular moment in the universal bestowal of grace. Rahner’s Christology allows us to envisage a fully human Christ, who by receiving God’s offer of absolute self-communication becomes one with God, and this is the meaning of the incarnation. Christ represents a key moment in the evolutionary process and the history of the cosmos.⁴³³

⁴³¹ Deane-Drummond, *Christ in evolution*, 41.

⁴³² Rahner, *Foundations*, 197.

⁴³³ Deane-Drummond, *Christ and evolution*, 42.

I cannot discuss the second option, that Rahner applies to Jesus, as the way in which divinization takes place must be subject to distinct cultures, and I am not privy to the sacred wisdom of Aboriginal nations. Hearing participant material suggests the former option, however, in that Jesus represented a higher level of self-transcendence of the world, and represents something more attainable by the wise in Aboriginal and other communities.

Rahner...acknowledges that due to the very nature of hypostatic union, Christ could not really be a perfect man, contrary to the Greek ideal of perfection prevalent at the time of the gospels' authorship.⁴³⁴

This seems to echo with the everyday ordinary, non-perfect people Jesus 'inhabits' to heal with, such as Mia and other community healers described by P, and make the perfect divine revelation seem closer to the everyday.

The Rainbow Spirit theologians write that when the *logos* became flesh, he camped among people and became part of their culture. They write that the word was made common flesh, not Jewish or European. God assumes a human form, common to all.⁴³⁵

The question raised by these participants is when exactly did the *logos* become flesh? In Nazareth at least, indisputably. But even if that were the sole incarnation, the inference is still that Jesus was in culture before invasion, a view shared by participants. The Elders go on to say that 'when Jesus Christ died, he was buried in the land and returned to the Creator

⁴³⁴ McCool, *Rahner Reader*, 159.

⁴³⁵ *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 61.

Spirit. When he arose, he sent his spirit to fill the land and make all things new, including our people.⁴³⁶

Regardless of subscription to the concept of multiple incarnation or otherwise, just one, Jesus of Nazareth, is sufficient to emerge in Aboriginal culture both from the beginning of time and from resurrection, as time is non-linear. The dominating point is that Jesus was present in culture before the mediation of non-Aboriginal interference.

It is obvious that the nature and purpose of Jesus' Incarnation bears similar hallmarks between Catholic and Aboriginal faith communities; the crucial difference (outside the cultural divide) remains the disagreement in frequency. For Aboriginal Christians, there are multiple incarnations, and will continue to be, in what I find to be a challenging but supremely comforting concept. It is one that welcomes Jesus Christ as a constant physical presence, and is testament to unbounded faith in God's power to love us and offer Godself to us.

[Contrasting participant material evidencing inculturation of Jesus](#)

Inculturation indicators increased and decreased depending on the extent different communities embraced Jesus through their respective cultures.

⁴³⁶ *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 64.

I acknowledge Participants A and B, whose practice emerges from the charismatic tradition and eschews several links with pre-invasion cultures. They feel that their pre-invasion cultures contain negative aspects, such as demonology and spells, that actively work against Jesus. They embrace Christ, and state that Jesus' spirit has always existed on the continent, but believe that he is not particularly present in or represented in their respective pre-invasion Aboriginal cultures.

Both participants referred to their Bibles as their primary and only sources of literal representations of Jesus, especially Genesis and John. However, their emphasis on the spirit of Jesus being in their countries since Creation implies at the very least an Aboriginal facet to this spirit, and guardianship or watchfulness over Aboriginal nations. From an external perspective, Participant B's community preaches in language, so the inculturation of Jesus' teachings appear visible, if not the figure himself.

Jesus as part of God-given Aboriginal cultures

Emma speaks in direct contrast to this concept, seeing inculturation as possible through her Adnyamathanha culture just as Christianity in its current form originated in a non-white culture:

A lot of people when they argue with me, especially Aboriginal people... who have come from a colonised Christian background, tend to always argue the point that Christianity is a white religion....and it's like you're white because you're Christian. You don't really know your culture, your language. But Christianity, religion, has nothing to do with culture and language... Christianity didn't start in England. You know, it didn't start in Ireland, in Scotland, in Wales. It started over in the Middle East. And those people are known as blacks over there. So if you're going to call Christianity a white religion, then you don't really know Christianity in the full sense.

...A lot of people will say well when it comes to Christianity like you have to choose whether you are going to be a Christian or you are going to be an Aboriginal. For us we don't look at it like that. We look at it like that God, when he gave us those different languages and those different cultures, at the beginning of time, that was to be able to give us an identity. And our identity in Christ is found IN Christ.

We don't have to change ourselves, our culture and stuff, because that was given to us. You know, from God. That's why at the Tower of Babel He gave us different languages. Yes it was to confuse them because they were all trying to get closer to God, but He wouldn't give you those different languages if He didn't want to be praised in all those different languages so why should we stop speaking our language; why should we stop doing our cultural things...you know, just because it's Christianity doesn't mean that it's going to be, you have to be a Christian and nothing else. You have to be a Christian and be yourself still.

And being an Aboriginal it helps you be a better Aboriginal Christian yeah? A better Aboriginal in the sense because you're focussing, you're now bringing culture and that part of your spirituality within your culture to God and making it pure, so everything becomes beautiful because you're seeing it for the fullness that it's in, and that fullness is found in Christ. So you don't need to disregard your culture.

Emma sees Christianity as dovetailing with culture; two distinct God-given practices coming together through the binding fact of Jesus' spirit having been in this place since Creation.

Participant C also describes this complementary perspective:

I'd be saying like we have our culture, 'cause God gave us that culture, and we identify with that, we but we also acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. You know, so we embrace both. You know you can't make us choose one from the other you know cause God gave us that choice.

Be a Christian. Identify (with) Jesus Christ as a Christian. But still live your culture. Hunt and gather. You know. It's ok to do both. But as long as you acknowledge Lord Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you know, you can still pay respects to your Country, and your Dreamings. You know God knows your heart. He doesn't judge.

Jesus as a cultural authority

As we have seen from Emma and Emori's narrative about the three holy men, they clearly indicate a belief in Jesus Christ as a cultural Aboriginal man of authority. This authority is

recognised by their section of the community and what is more, they recognised the figure called 'Jesus' when presented by missionaries, so clear was the parallel to them. The Adnyamathanha Christ instructed people and told them what to do, as well as prophesying. For Troy, Jesus gave the law from the earliest times, around sharing and custodianship of animals and nature. For P, Jesus comes in various forms to give the law, notably as *Kutatja*. Jesus' participation in community as an authority figure crosses communities.

Jesus on Aboriginal Countries

Shirley Purdie is a Warmun artist, who in 2008 was the recipient of the Blake Prize for Religious Art. In her 2013 work *Ngambuny Ascends*, she depicts the Ascension of Jesus within the local landscape. Art historian Rod Pattenden discusses the way Purdie articulates the earth as the scene for Jesus:

The drama of the scene is shaped within the forms of the local landscape and most distinctively is framed by a dense swathe of black ochre that locates the image in space and time. European eyes would, by convention, be looking to the sky, as this is the pathway by which Jesus ascends into heaven pictured above in space, attended by puffy clouds and soft pink and blue lights. In stark contrast, the space for ascension is rendered black, like skin, like crevices in the rock, like a void open to receive. Such void spaces appear as spaces for strong dreaming, or as water holes that sustain life, or in this case where the land receives the Spirit of Christ returning. Black is the color of skin, connection, and touch, and this void becomes a powerful site for transformation where the divine activity is represented in a way that draws on the felt intimacy of skin, the surface touch of human relations. Here, *Ngambuny*, the Christ figure, returns to the land as sustainer, where God as Creator Spirit resides.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁷ Rod Pattenden, "Seeing otherwise: touching sacred things" in *Indigenous Australia and the unfinished business of theology: cross-cultural engagement*, ed. Jione Havea (US: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 24.

This last statement is in contrast to other worldviews, such as the Kurna worldview held on the Country where I write. This holds that there are three worlds: the physical, spiritual (still among us) and the sky world. Some people locate the major spirits in the sky world too.⁴³⁸

However this text does resonate with the participants who locate Jesus as a cosmic figure, present in nature and overseeing and within Creation, engaging with all Creation including spirit people and humanity.

Claire places *Ngarte Kweke Man* (Jesus) with God the Father, and also firmly in *Altyerre*

(Dreaming):

Ngkarte Kweke Man came along... (language) Jesus is still here with us. Jesus is still always with us. He's here standing with us as we talk here. Jesus is always part of Altyerre. (confirms this in language with another woman)

Claire's reference to Jesus as sitting within *Altyerre*, along with her previous assertion that Jesus' spirit has been here from the beginning, asserts that his presence is in the form of an Arrernte medium. As we saw, examination of the church at Santa Theresa reveals images of Jesus being smoked (an Arrernte ceremony), being baptised, and being carried in the womb of a black mother Mary.

As illustrated above, in every painting, to which Claire contributed, he is a black Arrernte man. The paintings also feature spirit people in the background, being with Jesus as he is smoked as a baby. The Arrernte spirit people are with Jesus, observing him, in fellowship

⁴³⁸ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, February 2017.

with him at this example of ceremony of initiation into the Arrernte community. Claire uses Jesus' language name, and talks about him walking with Arrernte spirit people, living and being with them on an eternal non-linear plane. She believes he is present at all ceremonies (invoking the obediencial potency lately discussed, as she prepares with meditation) and in particular, provides the plants required for ceremony and direction to locate them.

This recalls P's birds as messengers, and Deane-Drummond's argument about aspects of personhood in creatures. It appears that this recognition is existent in Aboriginal cultures, and they play an active role in engaging in transcendent experiences engaging with the Creator. This echoes the familiarity with Country Jesus demonstrates when manifesting as a healer in Mia's experiences, described above.

As Edwards reminds us, this quality was also evident in Jesus when he lived in Nazareth:

The importance of the natural world to Jesus can be glimpsed in two aspects of his life and ministry: his preaching of the kingdom of God in parables taken from the natural world and his prayer to God outside.⁴³⁹

Edwards continues, 'It seems that throughout his ministry, Jesus found communion with God in the natural world...Jesus found wilderness and its wild creatures...to be places of divine presence...'⁴⁴⁰

This is an experience common to participants in words and paintings; Jesus is to be found at times of his greatest transcendence through reaching out to God in prayer and meditation in

⁴³⁹ Edwards, *Jesus and the natural world*, 27.

⁴⁴⁰ Edwards, *Jesus and the natural world*, 30.

the wilderness; or, on Country. This also brings to mind Jack and P speaking about certain places on Country being designated for special ceremonies to connect with spirit, including, for P, those who are Jesus manifesting in the appropriate cultural guise.

Claire engages with Jesus and the Holy Spirit when she makes sacramental stoles, among other activities, and views Jesus as a constant presence in a manner reminiscent of Matt 28.20: '... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

(Jesus is) everywhere (language). Jesus is still here with us. Jesus is still always with us. ...When you like pray for him to come, but we know praying, he answers all our prayers, hey? And he's here with us all that time. He's here standing with us as we talk here. Jesus is always part of Altyerre. He shows himself to us now by the way we talking.

We ask, he comes. He works through our hands...and with the stoles we talk to the Holy Spirit – when we do the stoles we pray to the Holy Spirit and sing their little song. Holy Spirit works through our hands...Jesus works in so many ways...Just talk about (that spirit) and it's there all the time.

Similarly, Mia's earlier statement that Jesus is with the spirit people implies a cultural kinship; manifestation as an Aboriginal identity. Mia also sees Jesus as an Arrernte man in the way he works with her. She describes how Jesus is with her when healing, and how he knows the hunting grounds and facilitates spiritual travel and healing on Arrernte Country.

Rahner's 'obediential potency' refers to the human inner wellspring of grace and reflection, the spark of divinity within us that yearns for the infinite Spirit. It is when we listen to the voice of God in this space that we receive Jesus. Ngan'gityemerri woman Dr. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr calls active listening in this space 'dadirri'. This for Ungunmerr is where she

connects with Jesus, who she describes as being incarnate with her people and all Aboriginal people since the beginning of time.⁴⁴¹

Skye writes:

I perceived through my spiritual ontology that I had to absorb their spirituality in order to adequately understand their *Weltanschauungen*.⁴⁴² Hence, I had in-depth cultural experiences through a 'Smoking Ceremony' and bush walk with the East Arrernte; a course in 'traditional spirituality and reconciliation'...With these experiences, and spending every waking moment in informal conversation and sharing food with these woman and their families, late into the night, as well as being in quiet meditation absorbing the spirit of each community, and the spirit of the surrounding Land, I felt equipped to write in an authentic and respectful way about my People.⁴⁴³

At a conference on *dadirri*, Dr Ungunmerr prepared us to experience the Spirit. I listened to her, then went out with an Arrernte woman. We picked the right plants, sat in the right place, smoked the branches, listened to story, watched the drawings in the sand, listened to Creation, and joined our own stories. Like Skye, I felt a transformative quality to my listening and receiving. I had a tangible experience with an animal that Ungunmerr and other women present confirmed was the Spirit moving and responding to me, which before this experience I would have found incredible.

⁴⁴¹ Ungunmerr, *At the Edge of the Sacred*.

⁴⁴² The view of life of a particular group.

⁴⁴³ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 136.

Skye writes:

...the interviewee may be moved in God's Spirit to answer the question in *song*, or by *drawings in the sand*, using traditional epistemology and pedagogy, ways of knowing and of passing on knowledge.⁴⁴⁴

To the East Arrernte smoke is magical; it opens up another world, the world of the spirit.⁴⁴⁵

Ungunmerr said that there is no need to do a lot of thinking and reflecting – just be aware. People are close to the Creator in nature. Be still and wait. Like the seasons, allow each stage to be. There are deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very spirit of God, is a sound. The sound of deep calling to deep. This sound is the voice of Jesus. This is obviously the same as Rahner's obediential potency, and a common practice between non-Aboriginal Catholic and Aboriginal meditation practices. Being involved in this meditation with the women on Country, and my internal responses, called to mind Skye: 'The process by which we do Christology is to identify with Creation, with the Land; then we are identifying with Christ, and Jesus with us.'⁴⁴⁶

The privilege of sitting with women on women's Country and being at one with Jesus and Creation was as profound as any church service I have entered, and the connection with God stronger for the connection to the peace of his Creation, not severance from it by walls.

This listening to the still holy voice which is heard internally for Rahner, and internally and in the land for Ungunmerr, is expressed also by Emma when she talked about the presence of

⁴⁴⁴ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 103.

⁴⁴⁵ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 159.

⁴⁴⁶ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 204.

the spirit in the country, and by Mrs. Ryder when she says her rosaries. It is expressed when Mia listens for the little girl's lost spirit, as she explains that *Kweke* Man Jesus is with her. Obediential potency can also be detected in J's description of a cyclical eternity, and in the ceremonies held to engage with the Creator, Jesus, ancestors, or other spirits.

When discussing inculturation of Jesus, the way Rahner's obediential potency is expressed must be shaped by the local culture. This does not diminish its validity as an authentic manifestation of obediential potency.

P explicitly links Jesus' pre-invasion presence to Country, and to Country in the present time. He refers to certain parts of the country being stronger in Jesus' presence, likening these especially sacred sites to the holy ground beneath the burning bush. He sees the spirit people as moving over country, accompanied by Jesus, and the places most frequented by him are especially sacred. The implications of sacred sites for non-Aboriginal Christians suddenly spring to life. Shouldn't these sites be sacred for us also, as places recognised by Aboriginal communities as sacred to Jesus?

[Jesus incarnates as an Aboriginal person](#)

To return to P, recognition of Jesus as a cultural man creates a bridge to an inculturated Arrernte Jesus that P has described as *Kataja* Man, *Kweke* Man, and *Tjookabujera*. P sees no difference, in essence, between the Palestinian Jesus and these three examples of Jesus manifesting in his cultures. P describes it as the same spirit manifesting in different roles, similar to the triune doctrine. P refers to Jesus within his cultures as the messenger of God,

and he further sees Jesus as inculturated in many *Arrernte-Pintupi-Luritja* spirits, weaving his messages and wisdom across several facets of culture.

The spirit of Jesus can manifest at will, and he is viewed through the lens of these respective cultures; inculturated in whichever facet responds to the community's needs.

Emma talked about non-Aboriginal Christian reactions to the idea of Jesus appearing in

Aboriginal cultures:

It was too much for them to understand because they restricted yet again God's power, and they restricted Aboriginal culture...

They saw that in their Anglo culture that they came out of, that there was a lot of things that were against God and they had to turn fully away from it. And then that's what they thought; that every other culture, we have to wipe out their kind of thing and just put in this type of culture. But they don't even stick to the original Christianity.

...It would be totally different from what the Westernised Christianity is, so for them to come in and say this is what it needs to be, and Aboriginal people saying no, no, we've done it like this! You know, all that conflict came because of the restricting of God's power.

Emma's challenge around implementation of God's law or Christianity finds a solid place in the *Lumen Gentium's* discussion of intercultural expression of God's goodness, taking it a step further by implying that Aboriginal Christianity could take primacy. This was also apparent when she placed Aboriginal love and hospitality above other cultures' in the previous section.

Emma's identification of a non-white, Middle Eastern Jesus, is a source of empowerment to her as a non-white Christian. P, who we have seen expresses Jesus as a cultural being in

several aspects, describes the concept of Black Jesus similarly empowers him but also how it is the foundation of the capacity to inculturate Christ:

(Growing up, Jesus) was always presented through the Western, white mindset and cultural lens...He was white, He was blue-eyed and blond-haired, you know, the epitome of the Aryan race sort of thing.

And the concept of Black Jesus came when as Indigenous people... the key to winning over us people ... to listen to a message is when you connect to them at the cultural level.

But actually the truth of the matter is that he had an identity; his identity was Middle Eastern. His identity was coloured. His identity had totemic symbolism to it. He understood His traditional land and his country and where he came from and the role of that. He was also dispossessed, so he was a stranger in his own land, which has a great similarity to the Indigenous story; the post-colonial Indigenous story.

And when (I realised Jesus was a black man) it was a spiritual awakening, because all of a sudden I could begin to realise, or dream, that I could be black and Christian too. And that was the tension that so many Indigenous Christians have; is that for me to be Christian I have to give up my Indigeneity. To be Christian I have to give up my culture, my practice, my tradition. Or to not be Christian means that I can go back to those old ways, rather than actually say I can have both. I can be a strong spiritual person and value the message that Jesus Christ has brought for me in my life, and also be true to my sense of identity and self.

So in that regard the Black Jesus is a liberator, the Black Jesus is a man just like myself, the Black Jesus has a culture and an identity, and a language that's not English. It's not white, it's not colonial, it's not dominant. And has a tradition that he understands and knows well, and a genealogy as well, from a long lineage of his people. And out of that he would have understood protocols which is something that Indigenous people understand, but many others don't. You know, around protocols and cultural responsibilities.

And the other challenge of course, or the other liberating element was that Jesus was also a man who knew those cultural boundaries and those protocols, but also he was unafraid to cross them when he needed to. Case in point, speaking with the Samaritan. The woman at the well. He broke them for a purpose and for a reason and with conviction, and that's one of our challenges, is where do we break those cultural lines, where do we break those religious lines and those protocols for the purpose of presenting a message or a story or coming to a third circle; a new place of

being. We've only ever been told that there's two. There could be a third. But I guess that's the realisation of him. That's him. That's the Black Jesus!⁴⁴⁷

In this case, P has acknowledged that the 'Black Jesus' concept may have been used in some communities to manipulate people, but instead he has grasped and owned the concept, finding a liberation in his commonalities with the earthly Jesus. This recognition of Jesus as a cultural man creates a bridge to an inculturated Arrernte Jesus that P has described as *Kataja Man*, *Kweke Man*, and *Tjookabujera*. He sees emotional and cultural links with Jesus that stand completely independently of colonisation and the missionising churches.

Participant C, while, like Participant A, practising an admittedly removed version of his pre-invasion culture due to dispossession, identifies the Jesus figure in terms of having been here for a long time, satisfying the community history aspect. Participant C also paints his faith in cultural contexts. In the picture below, a father is explaining Creation to his son and the imagery represented by the Milky Way. The emu, Participant C's totem, is present as the father explains the Creation of the emu and their people. Participant C explains that the meaning of the picture is the primacy of God the Creator. Without God, Jesus, and the Spirit, there would be no Dreaming. Everything proceeds from God, and therefore Jesus. The father and son are marvelling under the wonder of Creation. This calls to mind Rahner's theories of obediencial potency and the supernatural existential.

⁴⁴⁷ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, 15 October, 2018.



Figure 8.15: Emu in the Milky Way. Author's own image, December 2020.

In Troy's story, God had to clarify to the grandfather that Jesus' father 'is not a human being,' further suggesting that for all intents and purposes Jesus appeared as a regular member of the community, if a stranger. Certainly he was not white, which would have excited comment and led to clarification on divinity or otherwise being sought earlier.

When people were asking 'Who's Jesus?' no reference was made to what would have been a notable detail; his non-Aboriginality. It also seems that those asking who Jesus was had yet to see him. Troy's ancestor, who had seen him, *did* recognise him as a community member, through skin, language, and introduction. I therefore surmise that the Jesus in this story is a cultural figure, familiar with and part of the mores of the community. I also asked Troy to

clarify this later on, when he states that Jesus was known to his people from Creation; just not by that name. Troy confirmed that this Jesus was a cultural man.

As I come to the end of the words of the participants themselves, Participant C underlines and emphasises what many participants stated somewhere during the yarning sessions. I commented, 'Those are amazing stories.' His response was immediate. 'Yeah, they're true stories too.'

Black Jesus emerges across the continent, not just along the dingo songline. Lyndall Robb, Christian outreach worker of the Kairi people, wrote of her identification with Black Jesus and the vital need for communities to have the opportunity to recognise and access him:

I have broken away from the Western missionisation process and believe in a Black Jesus! Aboriginal People must be able to identify with a God that represents who they are, just as non-Aboriginal people have created and believe that their White Saviour is a true expression of their identity, worship, liturgy, and even church buildings. Aboriginal...kids deserve this right as well-the right to learn about a Jesus who is truly expressive of themselves, one who can identify with their suffering. This Jesus cannot be one who has been blessed by riches and royalties as Aboriginal people do not identify with that Jesus. Our Creator needs to be felt more in the churches; and our expression of worship needs to be welcomed, not labelled as 'charismatic.' Aboriginal iconographs and paintings need to be hung proudly, and explained to both White and Black people. The journey needs to start at a very basic grassroots level.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁸ Lyndel Robb, "A homeless spirit!" in *Aboriginal Spirituality*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray, 118-120.

CHAPTER NINE: Yurikaityarrintheta (listening attentively)

White people are learning the value of Aboriginal ways in the development of human wholeness.⁴⁴⁹

Lee Miena Skye

Palawa Catholic woman

I name this final chapter with the language of Kurna Country, on the Adelaide Plains, where I came to reflect on everything I had heard on the songline, and realised I had only cracked open a door. There is so much more to hear and learn. I have been profoundly changed by the wisdom imparted to me and by experiencing Jesus Christ and the Spirit in what were for me, radically new contexts and far more connected to God through proximity with Creation.

Conclusions

The many, many things that emerged for me during this learning process coalesce in the following main threads:

1. Connecting to the Papal Address
2. A listening project
3. Moving forward

⁴⁴⁹ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 29.

Connecting to the Papal Address

As described in Chapter One, the address of John Paul II to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in 1986 was a highly contextualised rendering of the section of *Lumen Gentium* that deals with Christ reflected in all cultures. If we as Catholics believe that God has been present in all cultures from the beginning of time, as endorsed by this document, then it follows that we must accept that these cultures will have had experiences of Christ, be it a fleshly or spiritual event.

Catholic priest and academic Reverend Ormond Rush writes:

...within the flow of Church history, Vatican II is not to be interpreted as an isolated ecclesial event; it occurs within a living tradition as an attempt to re-receive that tradition in order to transmit it anew to future generations more effectively.⁴⁵⁰

This event would have huge ramifications for the way in which the Church viewed those of differing beliefs. Terms like *inculturation* and *contextualisation* were about to be born.⁴⁵¹

This thesis attempts to re-receive this living tradition in a way that actively incorporates inculturation and the Pope's exhortation to listen for Christ in culture as presented by Aboriginal peoples, seeking areas of resonance.

⁴⁵⁰ Ormond Rush, *Still interpreting Vatican II: some hermeneutical principles* (Paulist Press: New Jersey, 2004), p5.

⁴⁵¹ Rush, *Still interpreting Vatican II*, 18.

Areas of spiritual resonance

In paragraph 1, John Paul II alludes to Rahner's theory of obediential potency; the 'human inner wellspring of grace and reflection, the spark of divinity within us that yearns for the infinite Spirit.'⁴⁵² This is an immediate cohesion that binds us as one and the same with each other, much as expressed by Emma and Participant B, when they say that Jesus came for all people, not just Aboriginal people. The Pope acknowledges that this yearning is expressed differently across different cultures, and mentions 'Dreaming' as the way in which Indigenous peoples touch the mystery of God's spirit. However as seen from this brief survey, there are many ways in which Aboriginal nations seek to understand God and Jesus, and express this understanding and engagement.

The concept of *dadirri* taught by Ungunmerr is probably the most comprehensive system of engaging with obediential potency.⁴⁵³ However elements of this inner listening and responding to the spirit are discernible in all the participants' description of Jesus and the spirit being with them. If this thesis seeks to find out ways in which Aboriginal people inculturate Jesus Christ to which non-Aboriginal people can connect, this inner connection seems to be one of the most universal. Mrs. Ryder even attributes this capacity to her Ancestors, explaining how they would have been thinking about Jesus. In the foundational and primal activity of prayer, non-Aboriginal Catholics may be engaging in this same *dadirri*, or listening to the God of Creation.

⁴⁵² Rahner, *Foundations*, p137.

⁴⁵³ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, *Dadirri: inner deep listening and quiet still awareness* (1988), <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>.

Rhaneé shared a time when she was asked her opinion on Christianity and culture:

And when I heard him say, you can't serve two masters, I said well I got to disagree with you there. Because it's not two masters, it's just one, ultimate master. And the way that I am able to tell the difference is, when I'm out on Country, when I'm practising culture, when I'm speaking language, when I'm connecting the dots in relationships between my Elders and my kinships and my relatives, the voice and the Spirit that I'm hearing talking to me, is the same Spirit that I hear when I'm sitting in church. And when I'm fellowshiping, and when I'm connecting with people in the Uniting Church or in other denominations, or in the Christian community, it's the same voice.

God speaks to me when I'm on Country, God speaks to me when I'm in church. It's not rocket science. It's just how you're discerning God's voice.

Rhaneé not only describes the operation of what Rahner would call obediential potency, she explicitly places God's voice across cultures and confirms that this is one and the same God we are accessing in prayer, transcending culture and status, as *Lumen Gentium* teaches.

Major areas of spiritual resonance resulting from this project were the cosmic Christ and Wisdom aspects of the Aboriginal Jesus.

The cosmic Christ

John Paul II said:

Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your own culture. To develop in this way will make you more than ever truly Aboriginal.

Take this Gospel into your own language and way of speaking; let its spirit penetrate your communities and determine your behaviour towards each other, let it bring new strength to your stories and your ceremonies. Let the Gospel come into your hearts and renew your personal lives. The Church invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁴ Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

This viewpoint, after my research, no longer reflects for me what I learned. For so many Aboriginal people, Jesus is not a new figure to be incorporated into culture; Jesus is already here, in a range of visages but one divine, cosmic spirit, fused with Country. A white perspective of Jesus is not needed to validate heritage and make people 'truly Aboriginal'; perhaps acknowledgement of existing Aboriginal lore around Jesus would be more empowering. The European theology I read with participant material resonated with Aboriginal knowledge, it did not validate it.

The Address recognised connection to Country; to recall:

You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves...You realized that your land was related to the source of life.⁴⁵⁵

The participants developed and built on this idea. Through them, I hear Jesus as a cosmic being, embedded in Creation from the beginning, mediating and becoming involved with people's personal lives. The articulation of the way people engage with land painted a picture of the land as a place to find and be close with Jesus Christ in a tangible way.

John Paul II did not realise that for many people, Jesus is located in Country, and is accessible there, adding an extra dimension to the important social justice issue of land

⁴⁵⁵ Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

rights. However he did mention support for them, saying, 'Certainly, what has been done cannot be undone. But what can now be done to remedy the deeds of yesterday must not be put off till tomorrow.'⁴⁵⁶ This ties in to the calls for action above and provides a papal endorsement for Catholic protesters.

Shirley Purdie's *Stations of the Cross* traces the journey of Jesus over Easter. As described by art historian Rod Pattenden, there are elements of the concepts that Deane-Drummond and Edwards describe inherent in this work:

In contrast to Western representation where sky and cloud often convey the atmosphere of transcendent spirituality and the presence of the divine, this work is carved, as it were, out of the earth. This materiality draws the eye and the felt touch of the work toward the ground or earth. Aboriginal spirituality is shaped not by the sky, but the shapes and forms of the land that convey the narrative of divine action. This is a radical revisioning in comparison to the Western European imagination, where God, heaven, and the angels are always depicted floating above the realm of human drama.⁴⁵⁷

This quality of the eternal cosmic Christ in Creation, recognised by Rahner, Deane-Drummond and Edwards, was knowledge that arced over all the participant material as they gave examples of the way Jesus used land to mediate with them, such as little people, bringing rain, or a bush sheltering lost spirits. P explained how this links then to land relationship:

And after (the spirit people) comes the custodial side, so that's the totems, that's the ceremonies, that's the art, that's the stories, that's the paint, and so on and so forth.

So when people say to us, this is the way the church is represented by Aboriginal people, they called us animists...essentially idolatrists and so on and so forth. They completely misconstrued and misrepresented Aboriginal spiritual fundamentalism;

⁴⁵⁶ Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

⁴⁵⁷ Pattenden in Havea, "Seeing otherwise", 19.

fundamental Aboriginal spirituality which is that everything comes back to a Creator spirit. Everything.

P reminds us that understanding this land and culture connection must come down to listening, and sustained listening, to avoid the errors made consistently over the years by non-Aboriginal observers.

Placement of Christ as one-with-Creation is a recurrent theme of Skye's in this thesis. It is a key quality of Aboriginal Christianity that she wishes non-Aboriginal peoples to understand and respect, and a key to Christ's identity as embedded in the land, and therefore, the land as a sacramental element to Aboriginal peoples. She writes:

A Church that is Creation-centred will be a seeker-sensitive Church that "serves" its people (not itself) in the depths of their need. It is a Church of context, a place of the celebration of Creation and nurturing of life and wholeness and balance (mental, spiritual and physical), a place of joy and healing not suffering, a place of "wholistic" ministry.⁴⁵⁸

Turner, an Arrernte woman on the dingo songline, assimilates her love of created land and its spiritual beings into her Catholic identity with no paradigm clash:

As a Catholic person, I really love my Land...We just see how God created us, and God created everything, and how our Creation is to the Land, and how we treat Land in the eyes of those Beings in the Land, you know, the Little People of the Land...God will also Himself guide the Little People of our grandfather's Land so that they can look after us...so that we're just like joint guardians of the country maybe, joint custodians.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Skye, *Hearts are still burning*, 304.

⁴⁵⁹ Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, 219.

Edwards wrote that 'All creatures form one community grounded in their Creator.'⁴⁶⁰ For some Aboriginal communities, this is extended to little people, who work and walk with Jesus Christ, and must be an area to explore and learn of, just as Aboriginal people learned from missionaries of white auxiliary beings such as saints and angels.

This project reveals that for many Aboriginal Christians, Jesus Christ is placed as the cosmic Christ present with the Creator from the beginning of time and present in all Creation. He incarnates and walks with the people in a range of guises, with purpose and intentional engagement.

Wisdom

John Paul II reiterated obediential potency as a doorway to wisdom:

The silence of the Bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God's Spirit. Your careful attention to the details of kinship spoke of your reverence for birth, life and human generation. These achievements are indications of human strivings. And in these strivings you showed a dignity open to the message of God's revealed wisdom to all men and women, which is the great truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The voices in this thesis indicated facets of Wisdom in Jesus, and Ungunmerr's theory of *dadirri* has strong roots in contemplation and meditation. Wisdom can be discerned through many of the stories and roles heard. I reflected on what the address means for a non-Aboriginal person.

⁴⁶⁰Edwards, *Jesus and the cosmos*, 34.

The entire address is a call to open minds and transform, as described above when the Pope exhorts communities to act in certain ways. However, when read as a white woman, there is, particularly in passages describing the inclusion of Aboriginal people, a strong call to prepare the mind for God's transformative power. I believe this transformation was in effect when I attempted to put aside my bias on Jesus Christ and listen.

This project was an exercise in how to joyfully receive Aboriginal wisdom, and there was joy, but also engagement and learning in a profound sense that exceeded any expectation I had. My journey took me from interest and a white person's shame and desire to be better, to experiencing almost transcendent levels of connection to land, and conversations about God and Jesus that have deeply augmented my respect for Australian nations and people, and my faith. I have had the privilege of having formed long-term partnerships, many of whom now engage with me frequently to yarn and share. I believe I am on a lifelong journey to sit at black feet and listen, and all the while grow my relationship with Jesus in a newly-accessible (for me) space. This space is filled with a Jesus who goes by many names and who belongs in the Country in which I live. He has added many new acts and guises to the Jesus I knew, and multiplied my vision of his being.

When discussing the need for a new Christology, Skye speaks of a model where Aboriginal women can offer wisdom to nurture generations to come.⁴⁶¹ This wisdom was evident in many participants' stories, and many facets of Aboriginal Jesus find resonance within the Wisdom tradition. Perhaps this is the frame in which non-Aboriginal Catholics sit to hear.

⁴⁶¹ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 1.

Certainly the hospitality of Wisdom and the changing of minds provide a base for mutual discussion.

The call to action inherent in the Papal Address must include this Wisdom element: the opening of minds for reception of the Holy Spirit. We may then be prepared to hear what Skye calls parallels in a statement that resonates with this project:

Interestingly, many of the women ... did not have a problem with the combining of Aboriginal Spirituality with Christian Scriptures, where this could be done...The interest was not in syncretism or assimilation of teachings but in the drawing of parallels, to reveal similarities in Ancient Wisdom.⁴⁶²

There were parallels to be drawn between Wisdom across the traditions in this project in the roles in which Jesus is seen by these participants; messenger, healer, source of support/strength, giver of life, stranger, and giver of the law/teacher. Within these roles there are discernible traits shared with the Jesus as Wisdom incarnate, of latter Catholic scholarship. People are seen using gifts utilised in the hospitable, transformative Wisdom tradition.

Edwards writes that 'The wisdom Jesus practised was radical, shattering conventional worldviews and opening out on to the world of the Reign of God.'⁴⁶³ Some of the learning I heard while researching this thesis responds to this image of wisdom; it is radical, and definitely challenges conventional white Catholic views. In the spirit of wisdom we should open our minds to hear Jesus in this context.

⁴⁶² Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 38.

⁴⁶³ Edwards, *Jesus the wisdom of God*, 45.

A listening project

As we look to the future, we see that there are many things that could be done to improve the situation of this indigenous nation. Before anything at all is done, however, it is critically important to listen first...In the Aboriginal struggle, it is critically important that we speak of it ourselves...⁴⁶⁴

Anne Pattel-Gray

To welcome Aboriginal presence in the Church, the evidence presented in this thesis says that our Aboriginal brothers and sisters wish us to listen and learn, opening our minds to spirit and those moved by spirit to speak. Pattel-Gray wrote:

Aboriginal People have much to share of ourselves-including our own profound spiritual and cultural insights-as we encounter the text of the Christian Bible and communicate through Ancestral narratives, songs, and dances and ceremonies.

Aboriginal People are not critical of other cultural interpretations. We do not criticise others, because we know we are not the “be all and end all” of biblical interpretation. But what we *do* object to is the oppressive interpretations of the Gospel and how these are applied in Australia to our Indigenous People. This is why it is very important to learn from each other. If we stick our head in the sand, and do not relate to any other culture or People, then we cannot say we are practising or participating in any form of hermeneutics-we are, in fact, applying eisegesis. We know that it is very important to keep open the ways of communication.⁴⁶⁵

We cannot access these understandings, or listen properly, unless we understand, as Pattel-Gray outlines above, why we need to listen.

The biggest outcome of this project is the importance of listening. This was a listening project, and part of the reflection on that listening was comprehending the diversity among spiritualities and gifts that are referenced by *Lumen Gentium* and the Papal Address.

⁴⁶⁴ Ackley, *Church of the Word*, p94.

⁴⁶⁵ Pattel-Gray, *Ochre Spirits*, 49-50.

When Aboriginal People speak to the church and society about the 'truth', they are usually met with an attack of angry denial by the white people-leaving Aboriginal People with many questions about what is the Biblical doctrine of reconciliation.⁴⁶⁶

The church abuses Indigenous culture, theology and spirituality as it consistently imposes a pre-inculturated Word of God on a culture in its innocence and wears away its uniqueness until its innocent and unique perception of God is no more, devoured by hegemonic Church theology, spirituality, and culture.⁴⁶⁷

Listening, without the need to jump in and defend, is vital for authentic growth among non-Aboriginal people and a more culturally-inclusive Church. In an article about Reconciliation, Catholic writer Margaret Tam recognised the skill as one that is a traditional and historic Catholic act:

Listening is a key Judeo-Christian virtue also. The greatest commandment in Judaism is Shema Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4–9). The moral life that transforms lives begins in the ear, in the act of listening. It is also the quintessential monastic attitude. The Rule of Benedict begins with "listen carefully to the master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart." The key verse in Psalm 95, the invitatory psalm for Lauds, morning prayers in the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office), is "O that today you would listen to His voice, harden not your hearts" (Psalm 95:8). Reconciliation begins with listening.⁴⁶⁸

There can be challenges in listening to the wisdom of these people whose ancestors have engaged with the Holy Spirit here for so many more centuries than mine, and with some departures from the established Catholic doctrine familiar to me. However, the listening remains a gift. I see more faces of Jesus – a Black Jesus – which in no way challenges or diminishes my faith but rather, allows me to see how Jesus manifests within the Creation

⁴⁶⁶ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 220.

⁴⁶⁷ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 148.

⁴⁶⁸ Margaret Tam, "Reconciling a platypus nation: can churches help?" in *Indigenous Australia and the unfinished business of theology: cross-cultural engagement*, ed. Jione Havea (US: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 75.

and the people of each place. Within the diversity of God's Creation, Jesus Christ, who is in all people, adopts the hallmarks of diversity wherever he walks with us. The participants here are offering another way to welcome Jesus; perhaps, given the status quo of sharing, land custodianship and nurture prevalent before invasion, a better one. At least, one more faithful to God than the way of my culture's missionary history.

By starting from the Aboriginal end, and asking questions about Jesus as free as I could consciously be in my mind from the engineered blond Palestinian with whom I grew up, I have found myself enriched by Aboriginal presence in the Church; or rather, my presence in their Church (it will become our Church when equality in land and assets and recognition of spiritual contribution is reached).

The learning added breadth to my understanding of who the Christ is through a limited glimpse of his wisdom, kindness, healing and cosmic passion through the eyes of humanity in a differently cultured context. As a person with Aboriginal Christian friends, I am often asked questions about Aboriginal Christianity which of course as a non-Aboriginal person, it is inappropriate for me to answer. I see a reluctance to listen to Aboriginal perspectives on Jesus on their own terms, patronisation, lack of understanding of the complexity of cultures, and judgement. However the nature of the questions being asked of me indicates a need for learning about the Aboriginal Christ in wider Catholic communities. Ideally this learning would be guided and facilitated by authentic Aboriginal leadership, in media chosen by the Aboriginal Catholic community.

Awareness of the Aboriginal Christ would also help address the discrimination caused by racism that John Paul II raises in the Address and which is referred to by writers throughout this thesis. Listening to and learning from people breaks down ignorance and creates bonds almost involuntarily. How much stronger will the experience be if white Catholics come to it joyfully and with open hearts? If we are to privilege Aboriginal voices, and heed the Papal call to action and all the documents issued by the Australian bishops, we must be prepared to recognise our own lens and put aside bias to hear. If Jesus bestows diverse gifts, as reads *Lumen Gentium*, then his voice may be as diverse as his bestowal. Listening need not compromise doctrine; and surely the biggest mandate is to work towards that equality, in whatever guise that equality needs to take, that is at the foundation of our faith.

Listening must take on several considerations, before and after. We can hardly visit people with such trauma through missionary, governmental, institutionalised and systematic daily racism and then expect them to turn around and teach us when we have decided we are ready to learn. We must respond only to invitation, and respect boundaries and parameters. I was not always welcome to yarn in some places, and I needed to respect the history and stories of that place and back away. Yet when we do respond to invitation, we must also be responsible for engaging appropriately where possible. Learn what the smoking ceremony means, for example, recalling the despair felt by Aboriginal people at inappropriate non-Aboriginal response to ceremony. Know that on Kurna Country you do not use red dots, as these are reserved for senior men's ceremony, and properly speaking, only Kurna fire men should light fires.⁴⁶⁹ Learn to give an Acknowledgement of Country, and basic greetings at

⁴⁶⁹ Jack Buckskin, interview with author, March 2017.

least, in language, always guided by corrections and recommendations by community members. Advice may vary; but respecting this diversity and responding in context is part of the journey.

Listening carefully can result in a permanently shocking but effective perception shift. Writing on intercultural engagement, theologian and educator Rosemary Dewerse describes the discomfort when a person is shocked out of their cultural ignorance, a moment named by a participant in research she conducted as 'epistemic rupture.'⁴⁷⁰ She writes:

For Christians, the experience of epistemic rupture is in fact essential for the faith journey. We cannot grow in our understanding of and talk about God – and by implication the body of Christ – without it.⁴⁷¹

Certainly I can now respond to this idea of an epistemic rupture. I found my cultural lens hard to identify at times, until the challenge to my cultural mores escalated my discomfort to the point where I could identify that lens. This made it easier to put it to one side and to listen. It facilitated the learning process for me greatly. Had I not been shocked permanently out of this comfort zone and listened to that which was often strange or challenging to me, I would not have had my picture of Jesus Christ so richly filled out, nor understood to the same degree the compulsion I now feel for welcoming Aboriginal Jesus fully into the Catholic Church. Epistemic ruptures changed my learning path and practices and added momentum to my learning and desire to change.

⁴⁷⁰Rosemary Dewerse, *Breaking calabashes: becoming an intercultural community* (South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc, 2013), 83.

⁴⁷¹ Dewerse, *Breaking calabashes*, 86.

Dewerse recommends that ‘Caring for identity, listening to silenced voices, and modifying our leadership style all contribute to the task of nurturing epistemic ruptures.’⁴⁷² Certainly these first two elements were inherent in my project, and the task of leadership style is one I address in my work as an active commitment to responding to my own listening.

Dewerse also discusses at length exposure trips, long-term partnerships, and paying attention to the language we use.⁴⁷³ These, alongside listening, were key features of my project and will be carried forward as vital tools for collaborations and relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Moving forward

It’s your mob’s mess; you clean it up.⁴⁷⁴

Uncle Stephen Gadlabarti Goldsmith

Kurna Elder

The only way I can see the non-Indigenous person making amends is by walking the land with Aboriginal people and understanding their spirituality to the land...by walking hand-in-hand and listening to the sacred text of the land...it’s the same as the text that a white man brings to us in a Bible...⁴⁷⁵

Max Dulumunmun Harrison

Yuin Elder

⁴⁷² Dewerse, *Breaking calabashes*, 102.

⁴⁷³ Dewerse, *Breaking calabashes*, 103-110.

⁴⁷⁴ Uncle Stephen Goldsmith, interview with author, January 2016 (permission to quote given by Jamie Goldsmith, 2019).

⁴⁷⁵ Max Harrison, “Healing” in *Elders: wisdom from Australia’s Indigenous leaders*, ed. Peter McConchie, (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

Jesuit priest Michael Stogre writes that conciliar documents fell short of real change, describing Vatican II directives as not much further progressed from previous missionary attempts to adapt Western Christianity to local cultures. However, he writes that the council introduced concepts that would enable later models to emerge.⁴⁷⁶ This 'paving of the way', which allowed for the Address, opens doors to areas for examination and action.

In 1992, in their Pastoral Letter, the Australian Bishops supported this right to maintain their spiritual identity, commenting that many of the world's indigenous peoples have found God through their own traditions and customs, and asserting the need for the Church to 'make room for one another, so that Christ can find a home within all minds and hearts, thus ensuring wholesome and shared spiritual growth.'⁴⁷⁷

Cornish notes that this respect for Aboriginal spirituality is a development for the Church that is still evolving, as is Papal recognition of the place of land in Aboriginal theologies.⁴⁷⁸

Perhaps there has not been enough preparedness to actually ask what Jesus looks like in community and accept the answer. Perhaps through regarding Deane-Drummond and Edwards, with their perception of Christ embedded in Creation, the realisation may become apparent. The Aboriginal people in this project who describe Jesus walking on Country and being in the Country since the beginning, and who articulated their engagement with the Creator, are teaching something that these Catholic theologians are just publishing in the

⁴⁷⁶ Stogre, *That the world may believe*, 156.

⁴⁷⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, *A new partnership with our Indigenous people*, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (1992).

⁴⁷⁸ Cornish, *Catholic human rights tradition*, 20-22.

last few decades—a cosmic Christ. It is eminently possible to sit down and have conversations about how Jesus looks within this sphere, founded on a similar concept. The intricacies are very distinct of course, but there is that underlying, foundational principle.

Honouring this spiritual identity, spoken by John Paul II and upheld by the Australian Bishops, must include asking for black Jesus perspectives generated from Country, not making superficial connections to a western Jesus or even Palestinian Jesus. We must accept that for Aboriginal people, their proclamation of land as the basis of all spirituality.⁴⁷⁹ and for the Christian Aboriginals in this project, the home of Jesus' spirit, is a deeper reflection of the cosmic elements of Jesus Christ latterly discovered by the Church. We have a lot more to learn about the nature of Jesus from truly living the religious inducement to support spiritual freedom.

As described by Catholic theologian Bernard Brady, there is a distinction to be drawn between official Church social teaching and non-official Catholic social thought; that is, between the Magisterium and people such as Catholic activists and theologians.⁴⁸⁰ The Church has a tradition of not only contemplation but action and social transformation. He invites the Catholic reader to examine their own thoughts on social issues and religious identity.⁴⁸¹ Personally, I attempt to live as a follower of Jesus by taking physical action by standing with the marginalised, particularly in a society where I unjustly hold so much privilege.

⁴⁷⁹ Patrick Dodson, "This land, Our Mother" in Cornish, *Catholic human rights tradition*, 24-25.

⁴⁸⁰ Bernard Brady, *Essential Catholic social thought* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 3.

⁴⁸¹ Brady, *Essential Catholic social thought*, 5.

Throughout this project, Jesus Christ has, for the participants, been inextricably connected with Country in a sacred dynamic. Listeners to the Papal Address, and listeners to the guise of Aboriginal Jesus from these participants, should recognise a greater urgency and compulsion about supporting land rights for Aboriginal peoples and protection from mining, pastoral, and other destructive interests. An understanding of the cosmic Christ, and sacredness of Country because of this Christ's presence in it, demands Catholic action to support land rights, as this land is inextricably bound to Aboriginal Christology. Helping to protect Country (and its people, dying in custody in horrific numbers), whether by protesting, writing, or campaigning, under the guidance of custodians, is one way to address colonial injustices and if Catholic, respond to the Address. John Paul II states, "The Church still supports you (in keeping traditional lands) today." Cosmic, Aboriginal Jesus links God to us in a more immediate way and demands that as Church we stand with communities in acts of Christian solidarity. If nothing else, *Lumen Gentium* recognises that Christ is reflected in all cultures. It is deeply unjust and cruel to allow the destruction of some cultures' spiritual places and not others'. I am sure the demolition of Westminster Abbey for a Kurna site would not be acceptable to the majority of white people.

'The Life of the Church', in Part II of *Lumen Gentium*, presents that 'the mystery of the Church, simultaneously sign-instrument and reality of salvation, is engaged in history by the way in which it progressively embraces everyone's life.'⁴⁸² For the Church to embrace

⁴⁸² Benoit-Dominique de La Soujeole, "The universal call to holiness" in *Vatican II: renewal within tradition* eds. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

everyone's life, non-Aboriginal Catholics must demonstrably receive Aboriginal wisdom with joy, as John Paul II stated.

I also argue that the focus needs to shift from Aboriginal communities, as presented in the Address. John Paul II urges people that they must not lose their culture, and warns against 'not bothering' to teach their children culture. While acknowledging that atrocities of the past must be admitted by non-Aboriginal people, he casts responsibility for change back onto the oppressed. He states that Aboriginal people must learn to draw on endurance and patience for their journey, adding, that they 'must show that you are actively working for your own dignity of life. On your part, you must show that you too can walk tall and command ... respect'.⁴⁸³

I would respond that enough endurance and patience has been shown by Aboriginal communities as they underwent frontier wars, land dispossession, institutionalised racism, child stealing, wage theft, slavery, rape, and genocide. The responsibility lies with the Catholic laity and Catholic leadership; after all, the Address opens with a Papal assurance that the Church wishes to assist Aboriginal peoples with spiritual and material needs. (Perhaps it could hand back some of the stolen land it occupies).

Suggestions for the way forward

Pattel-Gray recalls South Australian Premier Don Dunstan's pledge, in the early 1980s, to fight internationally for people's rights through the churches, as the only legitimate

⁴⁸³ Vatican, "Pilgrimage in Australia."

Christian response to oppression. She says, 'if only the church could catch up! If only it could take the lead! If only the Australian church could take its place at the side of Christ-on the cutting edge of justice in this land!'⁴⁸⁴

A good start to examining strategies for the way forward is the list of challenges issued in 1988 by Catholic, senator, and Yawuru man Patrick Dodson. Reflecting on my parish, to a white person's eyes at least, it remains relevant today.

1. The church is challenged to recognise the land rights struggle as a primarily spiritual issue for Aboriginal people, in which the whole church, ministers and people together, ought to be vitally interested. (refer to other quote in earlier chapter about spirits being in land-this spirit included Jesus in light of what participants have said about the nature of his existence)
2. The church is challenged to accept the fundamental link between faith and justice. Land rights are a justice issue, an issue of fundamental human rights
3. The church is challenged to open her eyes to the poverty in which so many Aboriginal people live and to accept the challenge offered by Jesus' special love for the poor

⁴⁸⁴ Pattel-Gray, *Great white flood*, 149.

4. The church is challenged to read what the second Vatican Council has to say about non-Christian religions. She is also challenged to read what Pope John Paul II said to Aboriginal people at Alice Springs in 1986. Both these documents speak for themselves, and they demand a response, but we are all too adept at side-stepping anything that is remotely challenging

5. The church is challenged to promote Aboriginal culture and to develop a missiology which seeks to understand and respect Aboriginal Christians, to develop forms of church life that are free of the Greco-Roman and later Anglo-Celtic cultural overlays of Western Christianity. Such a missiology would also offer a much-needed challenge to fundamentalist Christians and others whose poor theology is doing untold damage to many Aboriginal communities through the destruction of culture and social relationships

6. In keeping with this, the church is challenged to improve the theological, philosophical and missiological education of those ministering to Aboriginal Christians

7. The church is challenged to educate all Christians to a deeper appreciation of white Australia's black history, of the damage that has been done and of the richness that remains. Education is needed for an appreciation of Aboriginal struggles to maintain and develop a life and culture that can co-exist with and enrich other Australian cultures

8. The church is challenged to help free non-Aboriginal Australians from the greed, ignorance, guilt and insecurity which cripple their response to Aboriginal suffering. These things inhibit the experience of the true sorrow and regret which would enable reconciliation.⁴⁸⁵

P spoke to me about the concepts he taught me within what he terms ‘the complex and sophisticated framework of understanding Aboriginal existential philosophy.’:

They really need adequate nuance and unpacking in order to get the true meanings to the fore...this should be given its own full explanation. Racism in Australia began with the manipulation of language/s to pervert and diminish deep spiritual and philosophical concepts sourced from ATSI systems of knowing and being and stolen by the Church for their use and for the positioning of their systems to be Truth and ours to be satanic/pagan.⁴⁸⁶

A key theme for P is reclaiming and teaching the complexities of Aboriginal theologies, and unpacking the damage misrepresentation and colonisation has done and continues to do.

Non-Aboriginal people need to listen and learn the truth.

John Paul II said in his Address, ‘It is wonderful to see how people, as they accept the Gospel of Jesus, find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people.’⁴⁸⁷ Catholic linguist and Arrernte Elder Margaret Heffernan sees several points of connection to build on:

⁴⁸⁵ Dodson, *Discovering an Australian theology*, 87-88.

⁴⁸⁶ P, interview with author, 26 September 2019.

⁴⁸⁷Vatican, “Pilgrimage in Australia.”

When it came to culture and ways of being in the world, there were plenty of shared ideas between the faith of the church mobs and the ancient culture and laws of my own people. A sharing of Creation stories where both talk of relationships between God, people and our land. A shared system of thinking where unchanging laws are handed down from ancient times through rituals and stories. A similar priesthood group of old men taking leadership in interpreting law and culture. The same circles of women fulfilling the central caring and nurturing roles within a constantly changing world.⁴⁸⁸

Aboriginal people can know the Creation stories and the culture of the church both ways, from our Christian teaching and from the stories passed down in our Aboriginal sacred knowledge. This is because they come from the same beginning... Altyerre means the unknown in the same way as God is really unknown... This unknown spirit creates everything in different ways, in different forms and in different places... This is talked up differently in the different languages.⁴⁸⁹

In the absence of many fellow Aboriginal religious, Gondarra calls for new leadership with a new spirit, hopefully that which can understand culture if Aboriginal and support it if not:

God is seeking Australian leaders, whether white or black, who have a new heart, a new mind, and a new spirit who will lead our nation to the kind of unity which is built on justice and love.⁴⁹⁰

Skye describes the need for 'new Christologies... diverse to meet the different communities inculturating Christ.'⁴⁹¹ She calls for the deontologising of western practices to establish a new global ethic.⁴⁹² She sees that the recognition and exploration of Aboriginal Christologies intrinsically connected to Creation will bear particular hallmarks, and bring about an empowering and unique Christology for Aboriginal peoples:

⁴⁸⁸Heffernan, *Gathering sticks*, 265.

⁴⁸⁹Heffernan, *Gathering sticks*, 266.

⁴⁹⁰ Djiniyini Gondarra, "Father, you gave us the Dreaming... Aboriginal theology and the future" in *From here to where?: Australian Christians owning the past-embracing the future*, ed. Andrew Dutney (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988), 152-153.

⁴⁹¹ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 54.

⁴⁹² Skye, *Yiming calling*, 351-355.

To me, there is definitely room for new Christologies that are the result of a rereading of Christian scripture within Australian Aboriginal cultural context.⁴⁹³ ... In...unity of Spirit Christ hardly becomes recognisable as a Western symbol. It is the Great Power, the Spirit Energy, the Creation Energy of Christ that is recognisable...we become aware of Christ as Living Energy, sustaining, nurturing and transforming life ...in the light of the articulation of this Aboriginal Spirituality and its relationship to Christ we can see how new Christologies can arise when Aboriginal theology and Christ come together; He will take on new images through the individual beliefs of each tribal culture.⁴⁹⁴

These voices offer compelling strategies for addressing shortfalls in the Church and promoting inclusivity from a perspective that presumes an Aboriginal basis.

Moving forward and learning

As the product of a non-Aboriginal social system, my mind tells me we must utilise formal white education systems, including further conferences on Christologies presented by Aboriginal speakers, Catholic schools to have curriculum informed by Aboriginal writers, more professional development available and articles available, and so on.

Over the course of this project however, I have been taught barefoot in the sand, and under trees, in creek beds, and in medical institutions while we implemented the principles of a yarning circle. The learning was oral and pedagogically and cognitively structured according to the nationality of the speaker. This afforded dignity to the nation and alternative spiritual comprehension for me. It also represented the “right” way to speak on these issues, according to one anonymous speaker.

⁴⁹³ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 56.

⁴⁹⁴ Skye, *Kerygmatics*, 61.

While Aboriginal teaching may not always be practicable in some rare environments due to people and land loss, there is no reason why we cannot commit to diversity and have Jesus conversations outside surrounded by Christ in Creation, or in a yarning circle with associated shame protocols. This respects the land and its owners as we learn. It is vital, for authentic learning, to assume a degree of subordination to local pedagogical practices. I learned far more listening to people, talking about their own nation, than from all the many books I read in preparation for this project.

As a result of my learning in this project, some things I would hope to nurture, as a non-Aboriginal person moving forward, include:

- Connections to Papal Address; lectures to parishes on the Address and what a contemporary reading means in terms of non-Aboriginal responsibility
- Intercommunity prayer groups and Masses, where Aboriginal communities wish it
- Greater representation of Aboriginal Christologies in churches under the guidance of the local community (murals, art, speakers, story, music, etc)
- Study groups taught by Aboriginal Christians where they wish to do so
- Outside liturgies to practise engagement using Aboriginal methods where local communities wish to teach, share or guide

- Study sessions on recognition of Jesus reflected through the culture native to this Country and greater critical approaches to an imported Western Jesus
- Wider consideration by Catholics of the issue of land rights as human, justice, and spiritual rights
- Worship and fellowship on Country
- Ecumenical agitation for improved support services for Aboriginal peoples devastated by colonisation in recognition of the 'stranger Christ'
- A deeper appreciation for the unique way in which the Aboriginal cosmic Christ is tied to Country, walking constantly with Creation

Rahner argued that the inescapably social nature of humanity has something to do with the Church as a condition for understanding the reality of the Church.⁴⁹⁵ It is time to consider the social nature of people outside the normative parameters of white Australians and discuss what the reality of the Church will look like when all elements of humanity, and their social mores, are included.

⁴⁹⁵ Ackley, *Church of the Word*, 151.

Areas for further research

There were many areas of interest raised when yarning with people that I lacked the time to pursue. Skye writes of many other elements of Christology, including Christ's place in eschatology and eternity, and the way Christ is inculturated using breath, energy, and sacred energy. It is to be hoped that further Aboriginal authors will be able to come forward and write with the expertise and authority non-Aboriginal peoples lack on those subjects.

I would also, given time, like to devote more attention to the material through the lens of other Vatican documents, such as *Gaudium et spes* and *Laudato si*, particularly as they relate to an Aboriginal cosmic Christ, *Nostra Aetate* as it relates to the universality of Christ, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church as it relates to sanctity "outside the visible confines of the Church."⁴⁹⁶

Other emerging areas I would pursue are:

- Dualism (blood association, dreams and visions, and cultural theodicy)
- Revelation (challenging Jesus of Nazareth as the final revelation of God)

⁴⁹⁶ "Catechism of the Catholic Church," Vatican, 1993, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

- One Creator (further learning would be valuable about how Aboriginal peoples experience God and Jesus on Country, through walking and listening. I still know many people who do not realise or will not accept that Aboriginal peoples worshipped the same God for millennia. Again, it's time to listen, and remember that Aboriginal people are the arbiters of their knowledge, not non-Aboriginal)
- Shadow Sophia – the dark side of wisdom in the world (in relationship to cultural dualism). Deane-Drummond explains an alternative side to wisdom:

Sergii Bulgakov used the term 'dark face' of sophia in speaking of the dark side of creaturely wisdom, though it is very important to stress that there was no such shadow side in the creaturely wisdom found in Christ, for he was without sin. Shadow sophia, for Bulgakov, expresses the dark possibility of evil in the world.⁴⁹⁷

- Pluralism
- The Cross (Rahner writes, 'the theology of the cross is an intrinsic constitutive element of the insurpassability of Christian revelation as a whole.' For Rahner, the cross marks the end of public revelation.⁴⁹⁸ Christologies independent of concepts such as original sin and redemption in this way would be fascinating. In this project, the cross does not establish Jesus as the Christ-his creative, teaching, healing and eternal presence does.)

⁴⁹⁷Celia Deane-Drummond, "Shadow Sophia in Christological perspective: the evolution of sin and the redemption of nature" in *Theology and science*, vol. 6 no.1 (2008), 13-32.

⁴⁹⁸ Rahner, "The death of Jesus," *New Christology*, 35-39.

- Differing time perceptions and eschatology (Troy's words about sharing to ensure everyone was fed remind me of God's table. Is it possible that God's kingdom was already effected here to the point where a cross event was unnecessary for Aboriginal peoples? Their way of life was unbroken and sustaining of people, creatures and land for millennia, and there was no eternity coming...it was now.).

Moving forward on Aboriginal terms

An area of learning throughout this journey was that we can move forward on Aboriginal terms without any loss of our own white culture and identity. Rather, by seeing and accepting alternative views, our faith, and love for the country and peoples with whom we co-exist, can be enriched. In response to the harm done to Aboriginal peoples, Christians can attempt to practise faith on Aboriginal terms; not tokenistically, but by recognising where we are exclusive and listening to how Aboriginal communities themselves wish us to proceed.

Non-Aboriginal theology professor Garry Trompf notes:

For, in the relations between Aboriginal groups and the white or migrants' churches, problems still abound. The biggest general problem is cultural imperialism in one guise or other. White Christians always somehow want Aboriginal Christians to be reflections of themselves, in their beliefs and practices-this is their dreadful cultural superiority complex...

Aboriginal Christians are expected to conform to in-house institutional pressures, to be a good Catholic here or a good Baptist there. Local culture is not being honoured in this way, neither is the Aboriginal impetus for ecumenism in the face of the continuing threats to their cultures and existence. Today Aboriginal Christians are in an increasingly stronger position to breathe new spiritual life into the churches. Non-Aboriginal Christians have to let themselves be inspired, and to hearken to the voices of the oppressed; and the expression of the Gospel through it (for, indeed, the gospel

is not Western); and to nurture this land as its primal peoples have done for tens of thousands of years.⁴⁹⁹

The Good News as heard through this project includes the voices of those claiming an incarnation of Christ in their culture. Can we non-Aboriginal Christians cope with acceptance of an opposing view of the way Jesus manifests in the world? I propose that through recognition of Jesus' roles across all communities as he spreads love and grace through the world, we can. I further suggest that the way Jesus is engaged with and manifests in all communities matters more than whether or not he is believed to have incarnated in different places and times. Certainly Rahner's conviction that Jesus as the pinnacle of God's redemptive love occurred only once as final undeniable instrument of God's revelation is not shared by all this survey's participants. In the final analysis I question who is to be the arbiter of accepted revelation, both in Aboriginal communities and for all.

I also learned, as discussed in the methodology chapter, that there is a lot of learning for white Catholics to do around different cognitive, linguistic, pedagogical, and philosophical approaches if we are to establish truly inclusive, two-way communities.

Galiwin'ku man and Biblical translator at Nungalingya College, Maratja Dhamarrandji, writes:

How we think is about how we are, meaning that we think in a way that shows how we are Yolŋu people. It may be hard to get this, because it is not straight-line thinking. This is thinking in the ways of culture, in the ways of mixing things, in the ways of togetherness of many things, like saltwater, which is not salt plus water, but together, saltwater. How do we think? We think in the way of how we are Yolŋu. This is a saltwater way of thinking!

⁴⁹⁹ Garry Trompf, "The gospel and culture: a non-Aboriginal perspective", in *Martung Upah: black and white Australians seeking partnership*, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (HarperCollins: Victoria, 1996), 181.

We think in our own way, in the ways of how we are. Balanda (white) people teach us Balanda way, Balanda knowledge, and Balanda theology. Sometimes they make sense, but not all the time. We need to construct theologies in our way, using languages and cultures, so that we think and theologize where we are, in the way we are, and how we are. Theology is not new to my people.

Aboriginal artists use dots, with different colours. These dots are separate from each other. The dots are not connected, otherwise they stop being dots. The dots are separate, but at the same time they are connecting. When you look at a painting, the dots connect and flow together. The dots are not connected, but they are connecting. The dots help you make connections. This is Aboriginal way of thinking for me. Things are separate, but they are connecting at the same time.⁵⁰⁰

Dhamarrandji not only provides an insight about different ways of thinking, and privileging these ways, but talks about connection of separate things. There is no easy alignment or synthesis of the elements I have discussed between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal views of Jesus. This project simply offers some examples, and one area of introductory conversation. However, these separate points, like the dots, can form a point of connection.

Dhamarrandji makes me reflect on when I hear Jack, or P, or Rhanee, or any other friend from differing nations speak. The way in which people use sand, circles, vertical levels, or a range of other imagery to speak, is representative of wholly distinct worldviews drawing on their individual cultures. They are all Aboriginal, but they do not necessarily engage with each other any more fluently than I, as an Irish-Australian Catholic with roots in Celtic druidism and paganism, would engage with another white Christian such as a German high church Lutheran. I have sat side by side with Aboriginal people learning foreign theologies from Aboriginal people of other nations. The dots then, are not between homogenous

⁵⁰⁰ Maratja Dhamarrandji and Jione Havea, "Receive, touch, feel, and give", in *Indigenous Australia and the unfinished business of theology: cross-cultural engagement* ed. Jione Havea (US: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 10-11.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal traditions. There is a wealth of diversity on both sides, and pan-Aboriginality is to be avoided at all costs. The best way to do this, as discussed above, is to get to know the culture specific to your own Aboriginal Country.

This is an understanding taught by Skye:

Indigenous inculturation is not interested in developing evangelical theologies; rather, there exists an awareness that the gospel will be adapted and accepted differently from one culture to the next and to give recognition to this fact.⁵⁰¹

Starting locally seems to be the key, but there is a need for continent-wide implementations generally of land rights and the institutional adaptations suggested by the Aboriginal writers earlier in the chapter.

In closing

In verse 12, the Pope interpreted *Lumen Gentium's* presentation of Jesus as being external from Aboriginality. I now challenge, through the experiences and traditions of Aboriginal interviewees, that Jesus was unknown on this continent before invasion. This does not in any way undermine Pope John Paul II's assertion that Aboriginal people were always in touch with the Holy Spirit and must bring their culture to Christianity. It simply supplements it with Aboriginal voices and knowledge.

In the literature review, most Aboriginal writers saw Jesus as present here since Creation. John Paul II saw Jesus Christ in Aboriginal communities. I now see some of the ways *how* he

⁵⁰¹ Skye, *Yiminga calling*, 143.

is present for the interviewees. Skye writes of the generosity of a Jesus Christ who is cosmic, one with Creation, and present for all, not just her people:

Christ is one with the Land, held so *sacred*, especially in Australian Aboriginal culture. Jesus is absorbed into religious rites, rituals and cultural practices...Christ is one with the Creation and Ancestral stories. Jesus' presence is felt or said to exist in all religious rites and rituals, Indigenous and non- Indigenous.⁵⁰²

This is a doorway for people to respectfully share space and worship. For Catholics, it is reminiscent of Rahner, for whom Christ is in everything, as the fulfilment of Creation.

Rahner creates a doorway for us to view and appreciate the pre-existing black view of a cosmic Christ.

I recall Skye's words in the literature review: '...within their inculturation theology, a preincarnate Christ is understood to have existed before colonialism; and Jesus is seen as Proto-Ancestor...'⁵⁰³

In the Address John Paul II talks about the Church joyfully receiving contributions from the Aboriginal community. We must joyfully listen to the knowledge and gifts to be received from the world's oldest continuing living culture. They may cause epistemic ruptures, but out of these grow real growth towards each other. The spirit of the text, of reconciliation and recognising Christ in black cultures, must override white discomfort.

⁵⁰² Skye, *Yiming calling*, 146.

⁵⁰³ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 197-198.

Skye wrote that for many Aboriginal women, faith precedes doctrine; people meet Jesus first in their spirit.⁵⁰⁴ This may well be the order in which we white Catholics need to respond to Aboriginal invitations as the primary, most foundational bridge of all. Skye discusses the ‘deconstruction of white western theology and culture’, and the fact that many white people find this threatening.⁵⁰⁵ Changes to the way we approach our cultural hold on Jesus can be frightening, and the idea of alternative faces of Jesus uncomfortable in their unfamiliarity. But in the name of justice, we need to learn the Aboriginal faces of Jesus in as many of his aspects as possible. As *Lumen Gentium* says, God is reflected in every culture. As Jesus of Nazareth himself says, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’ (Matt 14:27).

The Papal Address concludes:

You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.⁵⁰⁶

For Catholics, it is the people who constitute the Church. This project illustrates that there is so much more to learn to make our Church fully representative, and accountable to Vatican directives of inclusion and response to Aboriginal contributions. The beauty and wisdom of Aboriginal communities infused with inculturated Christianity is a gift being offered, and the opportunity to make a decision to follow Jesus regarding those discriminated against. Yet the possession of rich theologies and cultures is the privilege of Aboriginal communities not

⁵⁰⁴ Skye, *Tiddas deal with the threat of genocide*, 134.

⁵⁰⁵ Skye, *Yiming calling*, 343.

⁵⁰⁶ Vatican, “Pilgrimage in Australia.”

to be patronised. I hope this project will enrich white Catholics walking the path of reconciliation and listening, as others have done for me.

The most significant results, of diverse inculturated Aboriginal faces of a cosmic and a Black Jesus, imbued with what I perceive as Wisdom traits, are representative of an understanding of Creation mediated through a sophianic Christ that I am only just beginning to synthesise. It was a transformative experience, humbling, and in which I must acknowledge the intellectual and spiritual generosity of everyone who yarned with me. They changed my understanding of the depth and intricacies of the power of the Creator. However this learning can never be complete. The range of Aboriginal communities on this continent is vast, and the associated range of Christologies also.

The audience for this thesis is non-Aboriginal Catholics. The Papal Address gives us all the platform and the permission to walk this journey. In the past our Church has ignored, or contributed to problems of Aboriginal violence and exclusion. In this project I heard of the cosmic Christ on Aboriginal Countries, Jesus as Wisdom in Aboriginal communities, and many facets of the Black Jesus. Aboriginal voices call for us primarily, first, to listen to what they have to say on vital areas like these, and to position them in places to speak. If we now listen authentically to the stories, enter into sincere dialogue, and walk together, then the Pope's vision of a truly inclusive and just Church will someday come about.

You people try and dig a little bit more deep
You bin digging only white soil
Try and find the black soil inside.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁷ Paddy Roe, "The rush to Utopia: Australian priorities" in Henderson-Yates et al, *Take off your shoes*, 16.

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