Aunty Joan Hendriks is a distinguished elder of the Ngugi people of Moreton and Stradbroke Islands, Queensland; she is Indigenous representative for multiple church and government sponsored dialogues as well as teacher of Indigenous Spiritualities and researcher in Indigenous-Christian dialogue at Australian Catholic University where she works with Indigenous scholars and other colleagues including fellow theologian and Marist priest, Gerard Hall. Both attended the Spirit of Religion Project and co-authored this article.
An Overview

The term ‘Indigenous Australians’ is used to describe the descendants of the original inhabitants of Australia prior to European settlement in 1788. The term ‘Aboriginal’ does not include Indigenous people from the ‘Torres Strait Islands’ who share historical, linguistic and cultural commonalities with Melanesian peoples in nearby Papua New Guinea. Together, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up approximately 2.7% of Australia’s twenty-two million people.

The time of initial Aboriginal habitation of Australia is still a matter of ongoing debate among archaeologists ranging from 40,000 to 120,000 years ago when the Australian continent was geographically much closer to Asia. Best recent datings suggest the figure of the arrival of the first Aboriginal peoples around 68,000 years ago. Whatever the precise datings, Aboriginal Australians can claim the title of the world’s oldest, continuous, living culture.

Nonetheless, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is, in many ways, a misnomer since it refers to hundreds of diverse societies each with its own culture, customs and language. The preference today is to speak of regional groups identified according to tribe, country and language. Among the largest Aboriginal groups are Koori, Ngunnawal, Murri, Murrdi, Nunga, Yamatji, Wangkai, Yapa, Yolngu and
At the time of European settlement the Aboriginal population is estimated to have been several hundred thousand who spoke around three hundred distinct languages and hundreds more dialects. Fewer than two hundred of these remain today of which only about twenty are known and practised by sufficient numbers to ensure their continuation.

The impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples has been generally devastating. Negative effects included: the introduction of European diseases for which Indigenous peoples had no immunity; the overtaking of land and water resources so central to Aboriginal life and sustenance; the dispossession of lands to which Aboriginals have a deep spiritual connection; introducing opium, alcohol, tobacco and other addictive substances. Along with the depth of cultural misunderstanding, intolerance and outright hostility practised by many European settlers, the overall effect was the decimation of many Aboriginal cultures.

There is also evidence of more violent treatment of Aboriginal people which, until recently, had been mostly written out of the history books. One such example is the

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2 A general overview of Aboriginal people, country and tribe according to Australian States and geography is provided at (accessed 17/03/10): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples_of_Australia

3 Recent works are now cataloguing this experience from an Aboriginal perspective. See, for example, Rachel Perkins & Marcia Langton (eds.), First Australians (The Miegunyah Press, 2008).

4 An exception is Roderick Flanagan (1828-1862), The Aborigines of Australia (originally published 1888 to commemorate the first centenary of European settlement
Myall Creek Massacre in 1838 where European settlers murdered at least twenty-eight Aboriginal men, women and children. Although seven of the perpetrators were found guilty and hanged, many other such incidents occurred without attention to the rule of law or demands of justice. Aboriginal people were not normally afforded citizenship status nor, for the many who worked as horsemen, farm hands or in other occupations, anything like a fair wage.

Even after the former British colonies were federated into the Australian nation in 1901, and despite the fact that many Aboriginals joined the armed forces and fought for Australia in every war since World War I, the overriding doctrine of *terra nullius* (literally no-body’s land) prevailed. This meant that Aboriginal people had no legal recourse to the land they had inhabited for tens of thousands of years. There was for example, and still is, no treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians regarding the take-over of the land. Two other doctrines further undermined the possibility of intercultural harmony and respect.

The first of these which existed from 1901 until the 1970s was termed the “White Australia Policy”.5 The name speaks for itself. Although not specifically aimed at

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Aboriginal people, Australian identity was clearly ‘white’, even ‘British’. It was only in 1984 that “God Save the (British) Queen” ceased to be the official Australian National Anthem! In 2010 the Australian flag still highlights the British Union Jack.

A related policy that had more direct negative effect on Aboriginal Australians was assimilation.6 This meant that immigrants and Indigenous people alike had to adopt the dominant Australian customs and (English) language. The most pernicious aspect of this policy for Aboriginal people was the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families to mission stations or non-Aboriginal homes where their heritage was denied.7 This existed as official policy from 1909 till 1969 although the practice continued in some places well beyond this time. It was only in 2008 that the Prime Minister of the nation issued a formal apology to members of this “Stolen Generation”, many of whom are still alive without knowing their true family, country or place of origin.

If 1967 is a symbolic time for the reinstatement of Aboriginal people as equal citizens in their own country – following a referendum on the issue (with 93% support) 8

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8 The referendum specifically addressed two issues: including Aboriginal people in the census and allowing the Commonwealth Government (distinct from State Governments) to make laws for Aboriginal people. Laws allowing Aboriginal people to vote had been introduced in 1962 and most discriminatory laws against Aboriginal
the issue of reconciliation based on legal justice and land rights took much longer to take hold. In 1991, the Commonwealth Parliament voted (unanimously) to establish the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. In 1992, the High Court’s celebrated Mabo decision overturned *terra nullius* and provided for “Native Title” where Indigenous people could demonstrate continued occupation of land. Four years later the High Court’s Wik decision determined the possibility of native title existing alongside pastoral leases. Although based on English Common Law, there is here some attempt to acknowledge the primacy of Aboriginal ownership of land (and sea) in particular circumstances. The legal ramifications are still being worked out with reference to hundreds of claims, including nearly six hundred which are still before the courts.

### The Reconciliation Process: “Walking Together”

The reconciliation process between Indigenous and other Australians is a matter of ongoing urgency. The secular, political and legal models of reconciliation—leading to the

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6 HALL&HENDRIKS: PANIKKAR SPIRIT OF RELIGION PROJECT (2010)
important ‘Native Title’ legislation and apology to the ‘Stolen Generations’—cannot achieve the restoration of full human dignity and justice for Indigenous peoples unless and until their cultures and spiritualities are respected on their own terms. This is why intercultural and interreligious dialogue involving people of all traditions with Aboriginals and Islanders is crucial. This is not to claim, as some have, that the secular-humanist and religious-spiritual approaches to reconciliation are opposed to one another.11 In the Australian situation, both are necessary. We believe, nonetheless, it is the latter that is most crucial.

The importance of interreligious dialogue for the reconciliation process was the focus of the 7th International Interreligious Abraham Conference, Sydney University (October 2008). Entitled “Walking Together: Our Faiths and Reconciliation”, a major theme of the conference was the need to recognize, and then embrace, the spiritual depths of Indigenous cultures as a priority for the future of the Australian nation. If “walking together” means “I have at least as much to learn from you as you have to learn from me”, this requires a movement from assimilation, paternalism and interventionism to an approach which emphasizes the mutual sharing of gifts.

11 One expression of this states: “These two views of reconciliation are exact opposites and cannot be reconciled with one another!” Gospel Defence League (Accessed: 12/10/09); http://www.christianaction.org.za/GDL/articles/reconciliation.htm
Given over two hundred years of colonization, in which it was generally assumed that any sharing was a one-way process—in cultural, spiritual or material terms—a radical re-thinking is necessary. Indeed, the most important gifts we have to share are those which define our human and spiritual identities. Our argument is that without an attitude that respects the cultural and spiritual gifts of Indigenous Australians—and is prepared to learn from them—, then genuine reconciliation will evade us. This is why we suggest that “walking together” for reconciliation requires the involvement of non-Indigenous people who understand the absolute importance of faith and spirituality in their own lives as a catalyst for appreciating the spiritual riches of Indigenous cultures and traditions.

We will return to the theme of reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians when we consider aspects of Indigenous-Christian dialogue. Before that, our task is to attempt an articulation of Aboriginal spirituality on its own terms—even as we admit that such articulation is in a language and structure of thought more at home with European modes of expression and understanding. The danger in this, we readily admit, is that the ‘otherness’ of Aboriginality is somewhat lost. However, if genuine dialogue is to occur between cultures and traditions, we must enter the ‘hermeneutic circle’ with the aim at least of seeking understanding rather than imposing some naive assimilation.
The Sacred in Aboriginal Life

We have argued elsewhere that Aboriginal people do not ‘have’ a religion nor what we might like to call a spirituality if by ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ we mean a separate and separable aspect of human experience. Nonetheless, we do argue that Aboriginal cultures do tend to share what we have termed a natural mysticism of place.\(^{12}\) To begin to appreciate this worldview and experience, we need to acknowledge a very different ontology or way of being-in-the-world compared, say, to European peoples.

Tony Swain captures this disparity of world horizons by suggesting that whereas European consciousness is primarily temporal, Aboriginal consciousness is primarily spatial.\(^{13}\) In turn, such consciousness is linked to the experience of the Dreaming (called *Alcheringa* and many different names) through which one is connected to the sacred reality of nature, the earth, creation, the Ancestors, greater and lesser spirits, and every living thing.\(^{14}\) The experience is entirely natural: not a ‘moment out or time’ but the ‘time of every moment’. The purpose of ritual ceremonies, creative art, myths, stories and

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sacred songs is to mediate journeys of the tribal ancestors to inscribe one’s identity, energy and spirit. They connect one to the laws of the Dreaming, that sacred place of one’s earthly, tribal and sacred origins.

The primordial role of the Ancestors is evident in the way a child’s identity is derived from the place of birth.

As Ancestral beings gave extension to place they imbued it with their own being, and it is this stuff of existence, this life potential of land, which is lodged within a woman who thence is pregnant. The mother does not contribute to the ontological substance of the child, but rather ‘carries’ a life whose essence belongs, and belongs alone, to a site. The child's core identity is determined by his or her place of derivation. ... Life is annexation of place.15

This sense of connection to a particular place defining one’s very being is the most sacred and foundational reality of Aboriginal life. It is in this sense that one can speak of Abiding or enduring-place events as foundational. They are mediated through the Dreaming, beyond the world of history, time and change. It is place, not time, that mediates the sacred.

15 Swain, p. 39.
Whereas many other traditions develop meditation practices that concentrate the mind, Aboriginal cultures develop a consciousness of place that is more the concentration of body. Here we may speak of rhythmic events involving ritual, song and dance mediating the true nature of reality by bodily connecting one to the Abiding events and the law of the Dreaming. This bodily, sacred knowledge can be compared to notions of ‘practical belief’ and *habitus*\(^{16}\) to describe a form of knowing that is more primordial than discursive thought and revelatory of an entire cosmology beyond the reach of consciousness. One’s sacred connection to birthplace and country is not achieved through heightening personal consciousness; rather, one loses oneself and one’s ego through participating in the cosmic dance. The cosmos is both prior to and formative of tribe, people and human community. Human existence is dependant on Mother

\(^{16}\) The notion of *habitus* is developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Commenting on this, Mark Wynn suggests it “can be read as another way into the idea that there is a knowledge of the human meaning of space that is embodied rather than explicitly articulated, and that can be extended in the direction of a verbally tacit metaphysic. The *habitus* is roughly a set of dispositions to behave which exhibits its own kind of intelligence or appropriate practical responsiveness independently of discursive thought”. See Pierre. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990; original French, 1980); and Mark Wynn, “Knowledge of God, Knowledge of Place, and the Aesthetic Dimension of Religious Understanding”, *Australian Ejournal of Theology*, Issue 11 (Easter 2008). (Accessed: 25/03/10): http://www.acu.edu.au/acu_national/schools/theology/ejournal/aejt_11/Aesthetic_Dimension_of_Religious_Understanding#_ednref24
Earth and Sacred Spirit(s) by whatever name: *Bhaime, Nooralie; Wandjina*,\(^{17}\) to name but three.

Aboriginal elder, Miriam Rose Ungmerr-Baumann, points to an experience that her own Ngangikurungkurr people call *Dadirri*.\(^{18}\) She refers to this as a form of contemplation that is, however, not so much turned inwards as outwards, to the land and things about us. Importantly, *Dadirri* is not a method of meditation, but a way of life expressed through silence, alertness, observation and deep inner-listening to the rhythms of existence. The practice of *Dadirri* includes story-telling, smoking ceremonies and ritual dance along with the music of didgeridoo and clapsticks. Embracing the whole of reality, *Dadirri* reconnects one to its sacred origins, creative power or life-source.

Nonetheless, the experience of the sacred in Aboriginal life is highly specific to one’s place of origins or country. What is common is the focus on creation stories in which all life, values, ethics, behaviour, law and social organization are founded.\(^{19}\) The creator spirits or spirit ancestors formed the world from chaos. Their names are many and varied. Yet they also interacted as they

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\(^{17}\) *Baiame* is the great Spirit of south-eastern Australia; *Nooralie* dwells in the heart of the Murray region; in the west regions we hear the call of *Wandjina*. See Joan Hendriks in *Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines*, p. 32.


\(^{19}\) Vicki Grieves, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy* (Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009), pp. 6ff.
travelled. Consequently, the well-known Rainbow Serpent, associated with waterways and represented in rock art for thousands of years, is known in many parts of the continent. Other powerful creators of landforms, creatures and people have different names, forms and narratives according to particular places, country and tribal or regional groups.

**The Challenge: Hearing the Stories**

Most non-Indigenous Australians still know very little about the spiritual depths of Aboriginal cultures. Many are yet to readily acknowledge that colonization and attempted ‘assimilation’ of Aboriginals into “white-man’s society” have robbed many Aboriginal people of their sense of spirit and identity. This has become more evident with the stories of the “stolen generation” and the tragic number of Aboriginals who have taken their own lives in situations of custody and detention. In turn, this is highlighted by the comment of an Aboriginal person: “Separation has broken or disrupted not only the links that Aboriginals have with Aboriginals but, importantly, the spiritual connection we should have had with our country, our land”. As that submission goes on to say:

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20 Grieves, p. 8.
“It is vital to our healing process that these bonds be established or re-affirmed”.

It is not enough to be aware of the failure of governments to preserve let along foster the rights of Aboriginal people. Nor is it enough to arrive at wiser policies that respect those rights. We also need to hear the voices of Aboriginal people themselves. These voices tell how discrimination and displacement from tribal lands have led to the associated loss of songs, stories, paintings, dances, languages, ceremonies and other life-rituals. “How many people would take a knife and cut their mother” asks Judy Kennedy—since “the land is our mother, our life force”?22 Along with this are deep wounds of discrimination, racism, enforced settlement on “reserves”, children being ripped from their mothers and families (the Stolen Generation), high unemployment, deaths in custody, shorter life-expectancy. The list goes on. Images of blind prejudice, dying children, raped women and misguided righteousness plague the story of the post-European settlement of Australia and are carried in the hearts and souls of Aboriginal peoples. “I hear the cries of my grandmothers as they cry for their children. Grandfather, you can see me as I stand here and feel this hurt”. 23

22 Judith Kenny, “We Walked on Sacred Ground” in A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the Struggle for Justice, 44f.
Poet Judith Wright (1915-2000) is among the first non-Aboriginal Australians to articulate this Aboriginal experience of dispossession of land, culture, ritual, tribal lore and spirituality:

The song is gone; the dance is secret with the dancers in the earth, the ritual useless, and the tribal story lost in an alien tale. 24

Wright’s voice is significant because she also speaks of the imprint of colonization on the souls of European invaders who “oppressed by arrogant guilt” are also spiritually alienated: “I’m a stranger come of a conquering people”.25 Conqueror and persecuted alike are “raped by rum and an alien law, progress and economics”.26 Taking up the Aboriginal notion of the Dreaming, Wright declares to her sister, friend and Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal: “If we are sisters, it’s in this—our grief for a lost country” since “we too have lost our dreaming”.27 In other words, the reclaiming of Aboriginal spirituality is important for all Australians. It is not only an Aboriginal issue—or, in Wright’s words, “I know that we are justified only by love”.28

25 From “At Cooloolah” in Judith Wright, pp. 140f.
26 From “Two Dreamtimes” in Judith Wright, pp. 315ff.
27 From “Two Dreamtimes” in Judith Wright, pp. 315ff.
28 From “At Cooloolah” in Judith Wright, pp. 140f.
Along with stories of loss and exploitation are stories of remarkable resilience.\textsuperscript{29} Increasingly, Aboriginal Australians are reconnecting to their cultural and spiritual traditions. Moreover, they are beginning to articulate their spiritual treasures in the context of dialogue with other Australians. Commenting further on the Aboriginal quality of \textit{dadirri}—“inner deep listening and quiet still awareness”—Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman suggests this is “perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians”. It is, she says, “the gift Australia is thirsting for”.\textsuperscript{30} Here, one experiences rebirth, renewal, serenity, peace, and is made whole again.

Part of the wound of Aboriginal Australians is the perception of many non-Aboriginal peoples that they have nothing to learn—only to teach—Aboriginal people. This is most evident in the way that many Christian churches assumed they alone had a spiritual vision to share. In the context of Indigenous-Christian dialogue, Judy Kenny’s words are challenging and enlightening:

\textit{We named God long before Christianity came \newline We dream . . . our dream is God himself \newline Our symbols are symbols shared \newline We go from water-hole to water-hole seeking life \newline We paint ourselves with the colour of liturgy \newline We light our camp fires, circle their purifying smoke \newline Celebrate corroborees, sacrifice food}

\textsuperscript{29} See, for example, \textit{First Australians}.
\textsuperscript{30} Ungunmerr-Bauman, “Dadirri”.

16 HALL&HENDRIKS: PANIKKAR SPIRIT OF RELIGION PROJECT (2010)
The way of Aboriginal people is not far from the way Jesus taught.  

If what John Paul II said in his 1986 Address to the Aborigines of Australia is true—that “the Spirit of God has been with you” for tens of thousands of years and that the Sacred Dreaming “is your only way of touching the mystery of God’s Spirit in you and in creation”—it is also true that the Aboriginal people experience God in a unique way from which we all can learn. This unique spiritual experience is captured again by Judy Kenny when she states: “My God is an Aboriginal; my God speaks my language.”

This is not in any sense a tribal or partisan God, but the One who is the source of all things, the Sacred centre of all life. The tribal or partisan interpretation of the Christian Gospel has been predominantly that imposed by European Christianity.

Reflecting on her own dual-belonging—Australian Aboriginal and Judao-Christian traditions—, Joan Hendriks focuses on the spiritual connection between the Great Spirit of Aboriginal Dreaming and the Genesis story of creation. Both express an intimate relationship between humanity and the earth recognized in the Aboriginal sensibility of the earth as our Mother/Father. Although this

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31 Judith Kenny, “We Walked on Sacred Ground”.
32 John Paul II, Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Alice Springs, 29th November 1986, reprinted in Australasian Catholic Record, vol. 83, no. 3 (July 2006), 259-263.
33 Judith Kenny, “We Walked on Sacred Ground”.
34 Joan Hendriks’ reflection on “Father of All You Gave us the Dreaming”. Appendix.
may seem strange to European mindsets, it shows the power of Aboriginal spirituality both in terms of reclaiming sacred cultural roots and in expressing sacred political intent: only by returning the land to the Aboriginal people can the inner depth of connection to the Dreaming be rejuvenated. Then the biblical story of rebirth—“I will give you a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 36:26)—will come to fruition for all Australians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. This also involves a process of reconciliation and forgiveness—a process that highlights the power of love (Corinthians 13:4) while recognizing there is but One Body and One Spirit incarnating difference (Corinthians 12:12).

Pertinent to this reflection are the words of Catholic priest, Rod Cameron OSA, whose ministry among and with the Aborigines provides insight into the connection between the Dreaming and Biblical eschatology. Reflecting on the Rainbow Snake, prime totem of Aboriginal peoples among whom he lived in Northern Australia, he states:

For many years the Rainbow Snake has been asleep in the cave. We are living in a spiritual desert. But right now the Snake is waking up. Soon the clouds and the rain will come again. Rivers will flow and pools will be filled. The land will be made new.\footnote{Rod Cameron, \textit{Opala: A Search for Desert Water} (St Paul’s, Homebush, 1997), 17.}

The story of Aboriginal Australia explodes the myth of separate, bounded identities whose beliefs, customs,
cultures and worldviews are non-negotiable, opposed. In reality, the Australian Aboriginal story invades the hearts, minds and souls of all Australian peoples, irrespective of their awareness of this reality. Clearly, the European story has been in large measure a negative force in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Yet, many people have negotiated—and continue to negotiate—a way of reconciling these diverse ways of being in the world. Many live this in their own persons. And there is growing recognition that only together—through deep inner listening (dadirri) and genuinely open dialogue—will we be able to receive ‘new breath and be brought back to life’ (Ezekiel 37:6).

Reconciliation Revisited

It is not without significance that reconciliation is a biblical term which, in the Christian reading, has links to the Jewish sacred “Day of Atonement” or Yom Kippur with emphasis on prayer, fasting, acknowledgement of guilt, repentance and the forgiveness of sin. It is a time of purification not only of the people but also of the places which have been defiled—something which is surely pertinent to the re-sacralization of Indigenous sacred sites. While the notion of atonement is particularly directed towards averting God’s judgment, biblical reconciliation is especially directed towards the restoration of broken relationships, with God and others, so that the parties may live in harmony, justice and peace. It requires
of the offending party an exchange (often money) as a sign of the authenticity of repentance. Exchange and repentance are required before forgiveness, healing and reconciliation can occur.\textsuperscript{36} In this context, reconciliation has a definite legal connotation: it is concerned with restorative justice. Given this, the socio-political agenda of land rights, for example, has sound biblical foundations. It also raises the question, surely, of monetary reparation being made to the Stolen Generation.

So, while the re-establishment of justice is a condition for biblical reconciliation, justice by itself is never enough. Or, to state this differently, biblical justice includes a \textit{metanoia} or radical conversion of mind, heart and spirit on behalf of the offending party. Moreover, all parties are affected by the reconciliation process since it is oriented to the formation of authentic community, love of enemies, peacemaking, the ending of all conflict and exclusion, and the establishment of an entirely new creation.\textsuperscript{37} In this sense, biblical reconciliation is never simply about overturning an injustice between two parties; it is about the establishment of an entirely new order of relationships in which the cosmos is again made whole. This is why the Bible understands reconciliation to

\textsuperscript{36} See 1 Corinthians 7:11; Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20-21; Matthew 5:24; Romans 5:11; 11:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. This notion of reconciliation is drawn from what Christians call the New or Second Testament. As will be indicated, it has links with the broader biblical notion of ‘atonement’.

be a grace or divine activity in which the mysterious presence of God alone is enabled to draw good out of evil. Consequently, while biblical reconciliation is concerned with justice and restoration, it carries with it a vision of “a new heaven and a new earth”\textsuperscript{38} including the transformation of human lives, spirits and cultures. And the earth itself is renewed. This is why the legal and political dimensions of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, although necessary, are inadequate without attention to these more profound spiritualities of atonement and reconciliation.

Of course, from the Christian perspective, more needs to be said. On the one hand, since the Christian churches understand themselves to be the reconciled and reconciling community of the followers of Jesus, imbued with his Spirit, there is a particular role to be an agent of reconciliation wherever God’s reign of justice and peace is lacking. More than this, given the churches’ particular historical role in the violation of Indigenous people’s rights and dignity, they have prime responsibility for the reconciliation process with Indigenous peoples. In biblical terms, this must begin with acknowledgement of guilt and request for forgiveness, evidenced by such statements as:

\begin{quote}
We confess that we have sinned before God and against you. We acknowledge that the churches played a role in the administration of the laws and policies
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Book of Revelation 21:1 [Also known as “Book of Apocalypse”]
under which indigenous children were forcibly removed from their parents. Your families were dislocated and generational links were severed and we, as silent observers, have passively contributed. We have not honoured your culture, religion and heritage. We have failed to recognise your prior presence in the land. This land to which you belong was occupied and claimed without fair and just negotiations and we have profited from those acts of dispossession. We recognise with deep regret that we have been blind to our governments making laws, and other public institutions and churches adopting policies and practices that violated fundamental human rights and contravened the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948, entered into force 1951).

The apology must lead to a deep self-questioning about Christian missionary praxis which failed to recognize the spiritual gifts of Indigenous peoples:

We recognise and confess our failure to see that what has been done to you denied our common humanity and degrades us all. We acknowledge the prophetic and compassionate intentions of many missionaries and Christian workers. At the same time Christian churches, in bringing the Gospel to Australia often failed to acknowledge that God was already present in this land, and often failed to distinguish between its own `Western' culture and the good news of Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that the continuing social
dislocation, loss of personal identity and high rate of imprisonment is often a direct result of children having been separated from their parents.\(^{39}\)

Of course, official apologies by individual churches or the Australian National Council of Churches do not guarantee the ‘change-of-heart’ is taking place among the rank and file of Australian Christians. In this regard it is positive to see that most churches now include liturgies of reconciliation with Indigenous people in their annual calendars, recognizing that the transformation of attitudes is an ongoing process in which we are just at the beginning.

**Spirit of Religion Project**

Our involvement in this project from 2006 till 2009 has given us the opportunity to engage with members of Eastern, Abrahamic and Oral / Indigenous traditions focusing on the theme of “forgiveness as a way to peace”.\(^{40}\) It has not been simply a dialogue of the head—the study of diverse religious and spiritual ideas on forgiveness or reconciliation—but also a dialogue of the heart through shared spiritual practices. To this we could add the dialogues of life, love and hands in which the

\(^{39}\) Canberra Baptist Church (Accessed 12/10/08): [http://www.canbap.org/resources/issues/apology1.html](http://www.canbap.org/resources/issues/apology1.html)

\(^{40}\) Spirit of Religion Project, supported by *Foundazione Abor Suisse*, is led by Raimon Panikkar whose work in interreligious dialogue is well known.
participants live, work, study, pray and play together. As the only two Australian members of the project, we are involved in our own Indigenous-Christian dialogue which we then attempted to share with other participants who have little knowledge of Australia—even less of Indigenous Australians. They know something of the history of colonization which has had such negative impact on the lives of Indigenous people everywhere. More poignantly, for the text-based religious traditions, there is growing awareness that Indigenous cultures possess a spiritual relationship to the land which is crucial for the ongoing life of our planet. It is this spiritual attitude for which a world, threatened by climate change and the often ruthless exploitation of the earth, hungers.

Our problem, of course, is that we are dealing with diverse ways of being in the world. What is required is the commitment to a fusion of horizons in which Indigenous, European and other worldviews reach a new place of understanding that is large enough to embrace the ‘other’. This does not imply facile agreement of diverse and even opposed belief-systems. It is here where the vision of Raimon Panikkar proved so important. Our dialogue was not essentially about belief-systems or doctrines, but the existential meeting of persons in faith, hope and love. We do not and cannot pretend we have reached the end of

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41 See Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations across the Traditions* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 28ff. where he develops these diverse forms of dialogue.
such dialogue—in truth we are very much at the beginning. Nor do we pretend to speak for our traditions at the macro-level: we meet as fellow-pilgrims, committed to our own traditions, yet seeking a way to live in harmony and peace with one another. And to do so in a way we can learn from one another.

Beyond the dialogue between Aboriginal and Christian traditions that defines the perspective of both participants / authors, we briefly outline some of the points of connection with other traditions represented in the project.

1. JEWISH EXPERIENCE

The experience of the Jewish peoples, clinging to their spiritual heritage in face of the ravages of time and history, is akin to the experience of Indigenous Australian peoples. The spiritual heritage of Australia’s first people is experienced and expressed in terms of profound spiritual connection to the Land . . . and to the Creator Spirit. Joan Hendriks writes of this in the following way:

For thousands of years before time was recorded the Indigenous peoples were placed on this land by Creator Spirit. Throughout this lifespan Creator Spirit was central to the continuing Dreaming that encompassed every aspect of life; interconnecting the social, religious and political aspects of way of life. Relationships were of primary importance beginning with an intense relationship with the Great
Spirit of the Dreaming: a relationship that realised deep respect for the whole of creation.42

The Jewish experience of YHWH as the ground of all being, as the one in whom everything and everyone exists, is particularly mediated in Aboriginal spirituality through relationship with the land—our Mother earth. Ritual, belief, celebration, cultural lore and spiritual practices nurture life, harmony, creativity and courage in the face of life’s joys and struggles:

The mythology that is our religion is deeply rooted in the land; and therein lays the foundations of our religious beliefs and practices. Land is our very lifeblood. Our ritual, celebrations and ceremonies from birth to death are fine-tuned to nature as we nurture the life of people and places. We listen to the song of the birds; we hear the voice of God in the wind, the babbling brook, and the stillness of the billabongs. The grandeur of the mountains and the tracks through the mountains remind us of who is God. We also hear the groaning of the land as this sacred land struggles for survival against the odds of progress and modernisation. 43

Modern technological sensibility destroys human awareness of the Sacred and the poetico-mystical experience of the cosmos. It also denies the spiritual identity of the human person and—for Aboriginal Australians—the Alcheringa mindset and the Spirit of their Dreaming. Hence the invocation: “Today we still invite Father God and Mother Earth, One God of all Creation, to

42 Hendriks, “Father of all you gave us the Dreaming”.
43 Hendriks, “Father of all you gave us the Dreaming”.

26 HALL&HENDRIKS: PANIKkar SPIRIT OF RELIGION PROJECT (2010)
reach out and touch us through the Spirit of our Dreaming”. 44 This is a prayer, a cosmic song, for all Australians—and for all humanity. It connects to the profundity of the self-revealing God of Jewish experience.

2. INDIAN TRADITION

The depths of spiritual insight in the Indian tradition are not without expression in Aboriginal Australian traditions. The movement from unheard, unthought and unknown to heard, thought and known is expressed in terms of Alcheringa—the recognition that life is lived in two dimensions. Keen observation, prayer, patience and the practice of dadirri—deep contemplation—are required for one to touch the Sacred Centre, to know the One / Brahman, to become immortal, to realise the self. The multiple things of the world—people and places, mountains and rivers, kangaroos and wombats, birds and lizards—are symbols and revelations of another world, another reality. They are “the masks of God”. 45

For the Aboriginal people of Australia, prayer and contemplation—or dadirri—are profoundly communal experiences. Their expressions are in liturgies of song, ritual, ceremony and dance. These are rituals of transcendence, paths to the sacred Dreaming, to the

44 Hendriks, “Father of all you gave us the Dreaming”.
45 See Rod Cameron, Alcheringa: The Australian Experience of the Sacred (St. Paul’s, Homebush, 1993), esp. 109ff.
Eternal Now. The dialectic of mortality and immortality is at the heart of traditional Aboriginal experience: “We humans live in time where passing moments are touched with meaning by an eternal presence”. What the Indian tradition expresses in sophisticated metaphysical language, indigenous Australians express through story and myth. They live this reality in their deep respect for—and intimate connection with—the Land, the cosmos, the Creator Spirit and their ancestors who, achieving immortality, point to the final goal of all existence.

Tribal lore, ritual and customs are sacrosanct. They inscribe ways of human behaviour, belief and interrelationship established by the Creator Spirit. As such, they communicate the divine calling, passed on from generation to generation. This assumes that human beings are free and responsible agents who must take responsibility for their actions with respect to the tribe and the cosmos. When laws are broken, cosmic harmony is disrupted. Transformative (and punishment) rituals are performed not only to eradicate guilt, but to re-establish the cosmos. In this respect, to use the language of the Indian tradition, “human freedom and divine agency co-exist without compromising the reality of either”.

3. BUDDHIST ENLIGHTENMENT

46 Cameron, Alcheringa, 77.
The Buddha’s path to Enlightenment—the four noble truths and the eightfold path—may seem at first sight a long way removed from the concerns of Aboriginal Australians. But what is *Alcheringa* if not the awakening from delusion? What is *dadirri* if not the way to enlightenment, realization? Is not the profound Buddhist insight into the radical interrelationship of all that exists expressed in the Aboriginal experience of the diversity of the things of nature united in the One Creator Spirit of the *dreaming*—who is their origin, life-force and goal? Is not Buddhist compassion for all creatures eminently shown in Aboriginal respectfulness for all created reality?

Buddhist emphasis on the call to Enlightenment and Aboriginal focus on cosmic harmony are interrelated processes: one cannot occur without the other. Both ways are intent on living in the present moment, penetrating its depths, revealing its secrets—not through the desires of the ego (the opposite is true) but in the realized practice of life itself. For both, the process is one of “self-forgetfulness” through the practice of contemplation / *dadirri* and connection to the buddha / life-source. The Buddhist asks how one can escape the Dharma-wheel of endless cycles of birth and death? The Aboriginal Australian asks how to enter the sacred Dreaming? These are both transformational processes of “awakening” to the really Real, requiring disciplined practice and the enjoyment of life-as-gift.
What is this life that seems to end with death? Whereas the Buddhist speaks of “undying” and “rebirth”, the Aboriginal Australian has his/her own cosmic perspective in which to situate the birth/death/rebirth cycle. Joan Hendriks explains:

Respect for Mother Earth and the sacredness of the Creator Spirit across country taught responsibility for the land our very lifeblood. . . . In a sense we are the land – we come from the earth and will one day return to that same earth when Father God calls us home. This is our Sacred Dreaming.47

The post-colonial experience of the Australian Aboriginal people has been one in which disconnection from the land has led to disconnection from the Dreaming. Like the “impoverished son” of the Lotus Sutra (and the “prodigal son” of Luke’s Gospel), Aboriginal Australians are called to hear again their kinship with the great Spirits of the cosmos . . . to learn again they are indeed the sons and daughters of the Buddha / Father God who calls them home.

This same story from the Lotus Sutra is also a parable about forgiveness and reconciliation. Tempting as it is to focus on untold violence done to Aboriginal peoples, there is also the hard truth which Aboriginal people themselves must face. In the words of John Paul

47 Hendriks, “Father of all you gave us the Dreaming”.

30 HALL&HENDRIKS: PANIKKAR SPIRIT OF RELIGION PROJECT (2010)
II: “Past hurts cannot be healed by violence, nor are present hurts removed by resentment . . . (So make) reconciliation and forgiveness part of your lives. Only then will you find happiness”.48 Buddhist teaching has a similar lesson when it states: “In the midst of birth and death we undergo burning anxieties, delusions and ignorance, delighting in and clinging to lesser doctrines”. As the Aboriginal people return to the true doctrine of their Dreaming—their path to Enlightenment—, their genuine contribution to building a new humanity will be realised.

4. THE WAY OF TAO

Aboriginal Australia connects with the Way of Tao in recognizing in creation “the mother of all things”. This is expressly why Aboriginal Australia names the earth Our Mother. The way of Wisdom which keeps “hearts pure, bellies full, ambitions weak (and) bones strong” is also the Aboriginal way. In particular, the art of “using the things of the world without being possessed by them” signifies the Aboriginal approach to the natural world—which is nothing else than the gift of the Creator Spirit, to be used respectfully. Such a spiritual attitude to material beings and created things, so evident in Taoist wisdom, is also a gift of Aboriginal Australia—if such a lesson can be learnt in a world where technology and market forces reign supreme amidst bewildering greed and beguiling ambition.

48 John Paul II, Alice Springs Address.
Indeed, the Taoist saying—“value the world as yourself and be entrusted to care for it”—expresses in a profound way Aboriginal sensibility towards the created, natural world. What is the World, asks the Taoist? “It is a sacred vessel not to be tampered with and spoilt”. More graphically, Judy Kenny says in Aboriginal-speak: “How many people would take a knife and cut their mother? That is what you have done with your mining and your roads”. To live courteously, serenely and gently circumscribes Aboriginal spirituality in all relationships with the material, spiritual and human worlds.

The path to conversion—to learn serenity, to be courteous, to live in simplicity and peace—is not a one-way affair. As Judy Kenny acknowledges: “I am compelled in all honesty to say ‘I am a racist’, I am part of the original sin. Teach me how the oppressed can be grace to my sinfulness, questions to my answers”. For this to occur, there needs to be a change-of-heart in non-Aboriginal Australians who need to learn to respect Aboriginal peoples, to meet them with equality, dignity and justice: “We ask you help the people of Australia to listen to us and respect our culture”. This is the starting point for the journey of reconciliation. The universal aspiration for peace and good governance concludes this

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49 Kenny, “We Walked on Sacred Ground”.
50 Kenny, “We Walked on Sacred Ground”.
51 “Prayer of the Aboriginal People” in Appendix.
prayer in the supplication that we “make a home for everyone in our land”.

5. ISLAM

Although Islam is a relatively small but growing religion in Australia due mainly to recent immigration, there is a long history of Muslim influence on Aboriginal Australia going back to nineteenth century (or earlier) Indian traders, Malay pearl divers and Afghan camel drivers. Some Aboriginal Australians are direct descendents of these Muslim forebears. More recently, conversion to Islam among Indigenous Australians has grown due to the higher visibility of Islam, a rejection of Christianity as the colonial religion, the influence of some high profile Indigenous Muslims and other conversions especially among inner-city and prison Indigenous populations.

Among reasons given for this still small but significant phenomenon is the manner in which Islam is seen as a religion untainted by colonialism and racism. In the Australian context, Indigenous and Muslim peoples have a shared history of marginalization by colonial, white, predominantly Christian Australia. Many find Islam a path of liberation from alcohol, drug dependence and other excesses of capitalism and materialism. They are drawn to the strict ethical principles and affirmation of communal-tribal values they perceive in Islam. This is particularly pertinent to many Indigenous who have lost
connection to their tribal lands and cultural identities. For them, Islam becomes a conduit for the reaffirmation of Indigenous spirituality, life and culture.52

As with the other Abrahamic religions, there is a deep spiritual connection between belief in a Creator God/Spirit and stories of the Dreaming. In particular, the manner in which Islam recognizes tribes and nations resonates with the tribal and language-based identities of Indigenous Australian peoples: “Islam allows you your identity, your tribe and nation that is quoted in the Qu’ran”.53 In other words, Islam is not perceived as supplanting local and diverse expressions of Aboriginal spirituality, nor as imposing a kind of pan-Aboriginality which ignores the primacy of people, country, tribe and language. This convergence between Aboriginality and Muslim belief is reinforced by, and interpreted in accordance with, the Prophet’s teaching that all races, nations and peoples are sent their own prophets and messengers. This is the role of the “ancestral spirits” in traditional Aboriginal belief systems who teach principles similar to those of Mohammad and Islam.

Conclusion

53 Abdul, a practising Muslim of Aboriginal and Baluch descent, cit. Stephenson.
Clearly, the spiritual traditions of Indigenous peoples, including Aboriginal Australians, have been little understood and even less appreciated in the period of colonization. There is still a widely-held perception that such traditions are primitive and ill-suited to the demands of the world of the third millennium. While Aboriginal Australians did not fare well in the first two hundred years of European habitation of their continent, their resilience is testimony to their heritage of being the world’s oldest living culture.

Moreover, despite all attempts to assimilate them into European cultural forms, they now begin to speak their ancient wisdom with renewed pride and energy. Politically, socially and economically they remain, for the most part, on the fringes of influence in Australian society. But that reality is changing even as significant obstacles in health, education and social acceptance remain. The tide is turning as more and more Australians begin to realise the path to reconciliation is our only way to an authentic future.

Reconciliation is not simply a matter of legal justice, although this is integral to the process including matters of land rights and remuneration to members of the “stolen generation”. What is required is a more profound spiritual reconciliation in which Aboriginal ‘outsiders’ are afforded full dignity and respect: this includes the asking and receiving of forgiveness for past wrongs and present
hurts. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue are the major means for achieving this end in the hope and expectation they will no longer remain outsiders in their own land.

Time the destroyer is time the healer. We have reached a point on our earthly adventure when the spiritual wisdom of Indigenous peoples, especially their appreciation of the sacred reality of the earth we share, is a—perhaps the—vital insight for the future of our world. It is not a religious doctrine, but a profound spiritual experience which all peoples, cultures, traditions and religions need to learn. As our reflections indicate, our dialogue has taught us that such insight and experience are validated by all traditions represented in this project. This may be interpreted in theistic or non-theistic terms, in religious or secular ways—but it is the spiritual gift which Aboriginal Australians have in abundance and are willing to share with all people committed to an earthly (and, we would add, heavenly) future.

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**APPENDIX**

**Father of all you gave us the Dreaming**

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54 This reflection on “Prayer of the Aboriginal People” by Joan Hendriks is printed in full in Jonathan Inkpin & Graeme Mundine, Kerker (National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission [NATSIEC] of the National Council of Churches in Australia, 2007). Online availability of prayers separated indicated.
The following prayer of the Aboriginal people was written in 1986 in preparation for the Pope John Paul II visit to Alice Springs. The Address given by his Holiness at the Gathering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been referred to by the Indigenous peoples of Australia on many occasions since then; and has been a means of seeking recognition of the deep spiritual connectedness that the First Peoples of the Land have with the God of Creation. The Dreaming From the Heart 20th anniversary celebration saw hundreds of peoples from different walks of life and cultures gather with the Indigenous peoples as one in the Spirit and Celebration of the Sacredness of sharing the Dreaming..

Prayer of the Aboriginal People

Father of all you gave us the Dreaming. You have spoken to us through our beliefs.
You then made your love clear to us in the person of Jesus.
We thank you for your care. You own us. You are our hope.
Make us grow strong as we face the problems of change.
We ask you help the people of Australia to listen to us and respect our culture.
Make the knowledge of you grow strong in all people, so that you can be at home in us, and we can make a home for everyone in our Land. Amen.

This prayer offers an Indigenous reflection of thanks to Creator God for providing our people with the Dreaming stories of life and creation. Stories that taught us to respect the whole of creation and gave us an understanding of the importance of the relationship of peoples and places. Our old ways taught us the responsibilities that go with being custodians of the land. Today we give thanks for the gift of the presence of His

only son Jesus in whose footsteps we have travelled over the past two hundred years in particular.

Our dreaming continues in the hope that our faith and trust in our Saviour will lead more people of Australia to learn to understand and respect our cultures, our traditions and ways of living with the land. Only then will justice prevail and provide an equitable lifestyle for the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

We must never lose sight of:

"Father of all You gave us the Dreaming. You have spoken to us through our beliefs"

We give you thanks and praise and ask your blessings.

Hebrews 1:1 relates that “In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the Prophets.”

Milbi Dibaar also reminds us that “Our ancestors knew God in their own way through story, land and relationships”

For thousands of years before time was recorded the Indigenous peoples were placed on this land by Creator Spirit. Throughout this lifespan Creator Spirit was central to the continuing Dreaming that encompassed every aspect of life; interconnecting the social, religious and political aspects of way of life. Relationships were of primary importance beginning with an intense relationship with the Great Spirit of the Dreaming. A relationship that realised deep respect for the whole of creation.

Millions of footsteps are embedded in the earth beneath our feet and across Australia. As the Indigenous peoples cared for the land as custodians and conservationists they
moved from placed to place for thousands upon thousand of years taking only what they needed. A lifetime without interruptions from outside influences; as they continued to conserve the environment and relied on the seasons to replenish the food for the journey. Respect for Mother Earth and the sacredness of the Creator Spirit across country taught responsibility for the land our very lifeblood... In a sense we are the land – we come from the earth and will one day return to that same earth when Father God calls us home. This is our Sacred Dreaming.

There is clear evidence in scripture of the deep rooted connectedness of man with God that lies in the earth beneath our feet. Genesis 1 relates the story of how God created man and woman in the following scriptures: 1:7 “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” God also created a helper for man and 1.21-22 relates that “the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man”.

The mythology that is our religion is deeply rooted in the land; and therein lays the foundations of our religious beliefs and practices. Land is our very lifeblood. Our ritual, celebrations and ceremonies from birth to death are fine tuned to nature as we nurture the life of people and places. We listen to the song of the birds; we hear the voice of God in the wind, the babbling brook, and the stillness of the billabongs. The grandeur of the mountains and the tracks through the mountains remind us of who is God. We also hear the groaning of the land as this sacred land struggles for survival against the odds of progress and modernisation.

For the first peoples of this land, People and Places of birth are the two most important factors in the nurturing of the Spirit within, and this connection is the essence that enriches the nurturing of a deep and meaningful
relationship with Creator Spirit through the whole of creation. “Who’s your family and where you come from” are the essential elements of self worth and well being of body mind and spirit. Our true identity and the grounding of being connected to whole creation and living in community.

Our beliefs and values that have nurtured us through nature give us our culture, our Spiritualities and ways of living with the Spirit of this great southern land that is now home to some 20 millions peoples. Let us never forget the millions of footsteps that are imprinted on this land by the custodians of this land and their ancestors today. Yes Creator Spirit you did give us the Dreaming.

“You then made your love clear to us in the person of Jesus.
We thank you for your care. You own us. You are our hope.”

And so our relationship with a God of Love and Mercy continues since our very creation as human being placed on this earth to love and serve the one God of Love. Hebrews 1:2-3 confirms our relationship with Creator Spirit in the words that tell us that “He has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Deacon Boniface Perdjert in a reflection on “The good things in our way of life” reminds us that: “There are many things in the Gospel that make me happy to be an Aboriginal because I think we have a good start. So many of the things Christ said and did, and the way He lived, make me think of the good things in our way of life. Christ did not get worried about material things. In fact He looked on them as things that get in the way and make it
hard to get to our true country. He was born in the countryside in a cave, like many of us have been born. He walked about like us and with nowhere to lay His head. He died with nothing on a cross. So many of our people die with nothing. He liked the bush as we do. He loved nature. He loved the big things like the hills and open spaces. He loved the little thing like the mustard seed and the grain of wheat and the corn, drops of cold water and the little sparrows. We have similar thing like seed and berries and yams, small water holes, and we like the quietness of the hills and the bush.”

Christianity came to this country in the mid nineteenth century and so began the interruption of more then 40,000 years of Dreaming, and culturally appropriate ways of maintaining a wholistic approach to wellbeing of body, mind and spirit. We have lived in the two worlds of Indigenous Spirituality and Christian traditions since the introduction of Christianity to the first peoples of the land. Many Indigenous peoples now identify with being an Aboriginal woman / man who happened to be a Christian “along the way.” This in accordance with who arrived first on the doorstep of your community to determine which religious group you would belong to.

At the time it was interpreted as “for the best’. Traditional language was forbidden and English insisted. In many, many instances there began the journey of cultural genocide and disconnectedness from place of belonging. An element of the process of dispersal to missions and government reserves; and the consequential dispossession of identity and spirituality of being. Many Australians now understand that we Indigenous peoples have a great respect for the land. The St Joseph Sisters publication “To the God of the Wallaby Track” relates: “Mt Sinai in the desert was a place of spiritual significance for the Israelite people. Their journey through the desert was an encounter with God.” And in reference to “Australians take pride in the beauty of our land,” they particularly highlight the significance that “for Aboriginal people, these
places are often ‘sacred sites’”. The Land is Mother, every creature and natural feature have spiritual significance.

Our Dreaming continues today and the healing of the fractures that are the result of our fragmented lifestyle today are being nurtured in the relationships that are growing as we weave our way back along the tracks of the Dreaming. We are binding the threads of life together in the knowledge that God gave us his only Son so that the love He shared with us right from the beginning of creation will one day bring forgiveness and peace. The road is rough and the journey is difficult. In the journey of healing we continue to gather together the authenticity of the Dreaming in the stories that will bring us together in an endeavour to move beyond the barriers of the two worlds and allow all to embrace difference. Having a positive outlook with a clearer view to our revival and renewal as men and women of strength will be the making of a faith that will be allow us to be who we are, Spiritual people with a deep connection to Mother Earth and Father God.

Our prayer to our God of justice is to:

*Make us grow strong as we face the problems of change.*

*We ask you help the people of Australia to listen to us and respect our culture.*”

In the 1990’s many decisions were made in relation to Aboriginal Issues of concern. These decisions opened the doors to a new beginning which is still yet to come. They included the introduction to the 339 recommendations of the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody (RCIADIC). In 1991 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) was the result of one of the recommendations along with the “Bringing Them Home” National Inquiry into the Forced Removal of Children from Their Families, which was launched in 1997. In 1993 The High Court of Australia granted the Murray Island people
Native Title to their land and this further opened the doors of opportunity for other land claims throughout Australia.

In the midst of these mainstream government decisions in 1995, funding was provided by the Australian Christian Leaders Religious Institute (ACLRI) for a workshop that gathered thirty-three Indigenous Catholic Church leaders from across Australia and the Torres Strait Islands at Turramurra. It was then and there the future role of Indigenous Catholic leaders became a mission to seek and find a genuine place of belonging in mainstream church. One of the outcomes at the gathering was the writing of a prayer that would offer a prayerful means of listening to our stories. Stories that still today beg to be understood by many Christians. The following Prayer went to Rome in 1995 with a Bishop’s delegation from Australia:

Aboriginal Jubilee Prayer

Father Our Creator,
You created all things, seen and unseen,
Listen to my silent prayer as I stand before you.

As my weary eyes look back over distant horizons,
Back to those days where my people walked.
The footprints of my grandfathers are imprinted on the earth
And the images become real to me.

I see my Grandfathers standing tall and strong, warriors of long ago.
I hear them singing, I see them dancing,
And my spirit moves within me.

They told of the emus fighting

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And the kangaroos picking up the scent of our hunters
The images fade away as I feel the hurt of my people.
I can hear the cries of my Grandmothers as they cry for
their children.

Grandfather, you can see me as I stand here and feel this
hurt,
Father Creator, is this the purpose of my being here?
Or is it your plan to reshape my people, to be once
against the proud race it once was?

Let me walk with you and my Grandfathers
Towards the dawning of a proud and new nation.
I thank you for my Sacred Being. Amen.

Today we still invite
Father God and Mother Earth,
One God of all Creation,
to reach out and touch us
through the Spirit of our Dreaming

Our hopes and dreams are placed in God
and we ask the Spirit of our Dreaming to

Make the knowledge of you grow strong in all
people,
so that you can be at home in us,
And we can make a home for everyone in our Land.
Amen.