

# Towards a Multi-Faith History of the Sunshine Coast

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## 1. Introduction: Multi-faith Local Studies?

Australian religious histories normally document one or two faiths. Thus we have, for example, Purushottama Bilimoria's (1996) *The Hindus and Sikhs in Australia* and Hilary Carey's (1996) treatise of Australian Christian history - *Believing in Australia*. In Local Studies, this tendency is especially pronounced. The scope of local religious history is often restricted to the travails of particular church or temple communities.

This paper is thus unusual. It attempts a multi-faith history of a region: Queensland's Sunshine Coast.<sup>1</sup> To develop such an account, we will need to identify the overall patterns – the historical phases - of **interaction** between local faiths rather than concentrate on developments within specific faiths. We will also need to tell this 'story' in whatever way multi-faith dialogue expresses itself in this region. As is the case for much of the world, multi-faith dialogue (or lack thereof) is often most evident at **spiritual centres** – religious retreats, church complexes, temples, and ceremonial grounds. Such foci of religious activity tend to be bastions of particular faith traditions, yet their rise and fall, and modifications to their function and style in different eras map out the tides of change. Equally, **local arts** - the cultural manifestations of local spiritual beliefs in art, music, architecture and literature – provide an excellent gauge of a community's stance on other faiths. For this reason, I will discuss the Sunshine Coast's multi-faith history partly through the story of its spiritual arts and its spiritual centres.

Particularly in the case of the Sunshine Coast region, it is difficult to separate multi-faith history from the history of local arts and religious centres. Perhaps due to the Coast's amiable climate and natural beauty, the area has become the home of many renowned artists, crafts persons, musicians and writers from diverse cultures and creeds. Probably for the same reasons, the region has long been favoured for state, national and international conferences, camps and centres - whether religious or secular. Thus the Sunshine Coast boasts the Southern Hemisphere's oldest and largest Tibetan Buddhist centre and the national headquarters for groups such as Sahaja Yoga, White Eagle Lodge, the Christian Embassy Jerusalem (a major Christian-Jewish interface body) and the Meher Baba movement. Both Queensland's Uniting Church conference centre and the state's largest Baptist holiday camp operate from the Sunshine Coast. Equally, editing for most Christian television in Australia is conducted at the Sunshine Coast town of Buderim, and Maroochydore annually hosts Australia's *Psychic Expo*.



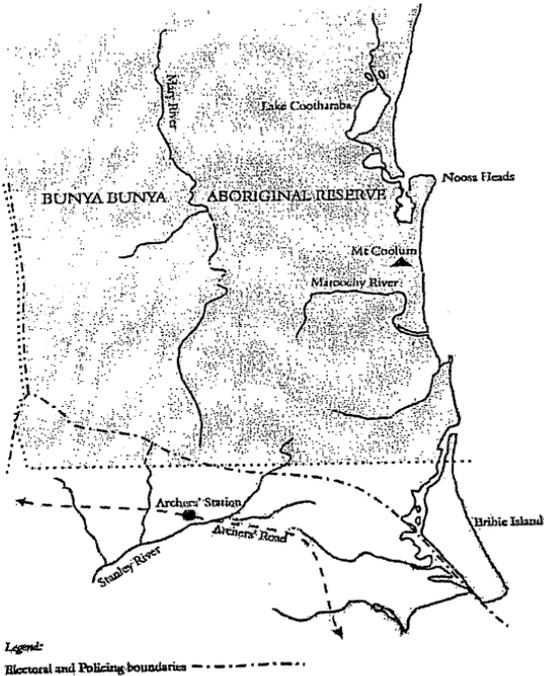
### 3. Two Worlds Meet: Awe, Disgust and Curiosity (1799 - 1850s) - Map 2

For half of the Sunshine Coast's recorded history (1799 until the 1880s), the main "religious worlds" were Christian and Aboriginal. These first collided with Mathew Flinders' visit to Bribe Island and neighbouring Sandstone Point (Toorbul) – an area of great initiation centres and large seasonal villages. For forty years, that area remained the primary point of contact between Aboriginal peoples and explorers, castaways and missionaries (Steele, 1972: 1983). Here the first white castaways experienced native funeral rites - including what to them was the disgusting habit of flaying the deceased and retaining their skins (Pearce, 1993: 122-123). Here also - in the vicinity of Sandstone Point *bora* (on today's Beckmans Road, Ningi) - was the first missionary foray and first Christian service.

The latter encounter, in 1841, typified this era's blend of non-comprehension, polite reserve and curiosity. The Ningi Ningi and their cohorts arranged for huts to be built to accommodate their German Lutheran guests. They fed them and even showed them around sacred carvings and earth figures at the *bora* ground. Then the missionaries conducted a service – but without any Aboriginal interest – as Reverend Eipper wrote (1842:2), "as quietly as we could."

For both sides, these first encounters must have seemed disappointing. The missionaries left with a distinct impression that until native people learnt to farm and displayed less levity at Christian rites, there was no hope for them (Eipper, 1842: 2). Rev. Schmidt was dismayed at his hosts' confidence in their own spirituality and lifestyle: "they preferred their mode of life to ours... they consider themselves superior to us... they have expressed the opinion, that they are our masters in the bush" (Schmidt, 1843 in Lippman, 1981: 23). Schmidt and Eipper proved to be amongst the most scathing of all Australian missionaries in their opinion of native religion, and the least interested in learning anything about it. They believed Aboriginals lacked even the rudiments of worship (Harris, 1990: 108-9, 132-3, 542).

Map II  
1840s - 1860s



Local Aboriginals were similarly exasperated by what they perceived to be Christian ignorance and presumption. They were constantly stopping Pamphlet – a castaway – from coming too near their potent funerary rites, to the extent that they were “very much pleased” when he refused to join the funerary songs (Pearce, 1993: 123). Twenty years later, Yilbung, a major Ningi warrior-leader (later a major resistance leader), kindly carried Eipper’s and Schmidt’s goods, only to be repeatedly ordered by these missionaries to eat rice and say Grace. In many ways, Yilbung’s response to this predicament summarizes his people’s perception of Christianity:

he (Yilbung) replied, in great anger, that he had no desire to eat any rice and that he would not ‘speak with God’ - God being not in the bush. He told us, likewise, that he would speak no more with us. (Schmidt, 1843 in Gunson, 1978: 118)

Nevertheless, even in these early years, Christians were awe-struck by the beauty and atmosphere of places local Aboriginals held sacred (Jones, 1997). Even the immovable Lutherans, when they managed to reach the inner sanctum of Baroon – a large, park-like valley set in a majestic ravine of rapids – described it as “paradise” (Jones, 1990: 14).

Likewise, Ludwig Leichhardt, the devout Lutheran explorer, was quick to sense the spiritual significance of the bunya forests. In letters to his mother in Germany, he likened the groves to a cathedral:

But what can I say about the Bunya Bunya brush?... About this majestic tree whose trunk seems like a pillar supporting the vault of Heaven? About its cones, their fall, sounding far through the silence of the brush? What am I to say about the multitude of shrubs and rare trees that grow here? (Arousseau, 1968: 704)

In another letter, Leichhardt confesses that at Baroon: “the grandeur and solitudes... produces a strange feeling of exaltation” (Arousseau, 1968: 642).

One white man who knew the local people intimately and partook in several Bunya Festivals was Tom Petrie. He was so taken with the experience that he took a ship down to Sydney to persuade Governor Gipps to proclaim the entire area a reserve. This is how the Sunshine Coast/ 'North Coast' was born (Taiton, c.1983: 18) - as the Bunya-Bunya Reserve, created out of respect for "Aborigines (who come) from considerable distances (to) resort at certain times of the year to this district" (Gipps, 1842 in Fink, 1992). The Proclamation amounted to granting a "permanent home for... periodic bunya feasts, undisturbed by... squatters and timbergetters" (Heap, 1965: 4). Given that the year was 1842, the decree is an extraordinary act of multi-faith tolerance.

#### 4. Violent Competition (1850s - 1890s) – *Map 3*

As Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity remained the principal faiths of the region throughout this period, we will concentrate here on their interaction. As elsewhere else in Australia, initial tolerance of Aboriginal spirituality quickly gave way to violent competition over the use of the area. Squatters and timbergetters began penetrating northward, and one of the first acts of the newly formed Queensland Parliament was to throw open the Bunya Bunya Reserve for settlement.

From the Parliament's standpoint, there were sound reasons for this. Since its inception, the Bunya Bunya Reserve, and especially its ceremonial gatherings, had been perceived as a "thickly inhabited" stronghold (Simpson, 1844: 2 in Langevad, 1979; Archer, 1897: 70) out of which Aboriginal groups launched guerrilla attacks. After all, Baroon remained the 'inter-tribal parliament' (Petrie Rollo, 1985). It was here that various Aboriginal nations declared and planned southeast Queensland's 'Black War' (1842-1855) after one group shared the gruesome news of the Kilcoy poisonings (James Davis, in Langevad c.1983: 4 -5; Laurie, 1959; Jones, 1990: 4-26). Thereafter, local attitudes to whites were generally hostile, as evidenced in the maltreatment and killing of castaways at Cooloola and Coolum (Windolf, 1998).

During the 'Black War' *the Moreton Bay Courier* gave regular updates on the state of the bunya crop. Whether poor or bounteous, the bunya nut harvest was regarded an omen for impending 'atrocities' (for example, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 1844). It was simply a matter of time before the sacred bunya groves were themselves attacked. In the 1850s, a Native Police corps under Ltnt. Fred Wheeler regularly 'patrolled' into the Reserve to 'disperse' troublesome blacks. Between this time and the early 1860s, Wheeler engaged in several pitched battles with 'Bunya Bunya blacks' here and towards Esk (Wheeler, 1860-1861).

Despite this state of open and covert warfare with settlers, Indigenous groups persisted in their pilgrimage. There are photographs from the early 1890s showing Clarence River (NSW) people camped at Brisbane on their way up to the bunya lands. Even this late, scores to a couple of hundred Aboriginals participated in the ceremonies and feast. Charlott Kuskopf - an early Woombye settler- recalls a post-bunya camp in her paddock c.1890s - the pilgrims "laughing, joking half the night." In the morning, the celebrators were gone, leaving dillies full of bunya

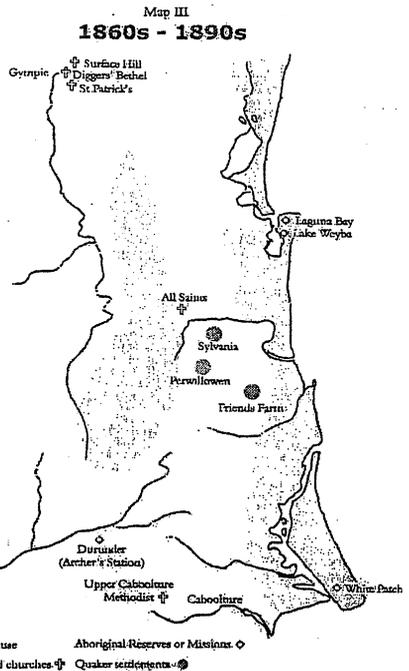
nuts for the Kuskopfs - a bunya festival tradition of goodwill that dated to pre-settlement times (Kuskopf, 1977: 22-23).

Leaders of Indigenous spirituality- the healers ('medicine men/ women') and increase specialists (i.e., rainmakers and the 'bosses' of various important totems) took the forefront of the violent new 'dialogue.' One of the main heroes of the local resistance was a spiritual leader and warrior from Blackall Ranges bunya country - Dundalli, who was hanged from the Brisbane Post Office in 1854 (Tundle, 1960: 4; Paddy Jerome, *pers. comm.*, 2003). Petrie mentions other spiritual leaders - Puram the rainmaker and Karal the increase specialist - being shot dead on the Maroochy River whilst gathering shellfish (Petrie, 1983). Conversely, Reverend John Matthews describes local *kundir* (medicine men) devising supernatural means to cope with the invasion. One boasted of

being bulletproof. Another claimed that a higher-level *kundir* tossed him out of harm's way and vanished underground. Some *kundir* claimed to be able to make Aboriginal camps invisible whenever Native Police and settlers came to slaughter the occupants (Matthews, 1910: 176).

Perhaps the strongest 'voice' of 'conflict dialogue' was Dalaipi - the Caboolture/ Pine Rivers rainmaker. In a series of remarkable statements (*Moreton Bay Courier*, 1858 - 1859; Petrie, 1983: 182f), Dalaipi derides whites as "birds of prey" who take from the land and move on. He contrasts this with his people's reverence for the bush. Elsewhere, Dalaipi attacks the hypocrisy and cruelty of missionaries who shoot his people "like birds" for taking "a few ears of corn or a dillyful of potatoes" when they are hungry, after having stolen their land and livelihood. Dalaipi goes on to blame Christian missionaries for his people's current immoralities:

Before the whitefellows came... we wore no dress, but knew no shame and were all free and happy... What did we learn from them (the missionaries)? The young blacks got to know too much of the whites ways and habits- too much of what was wrong and right. Before any white people came, we never stole anything, but distributed everything we had and were always happy. (Petrie, 1983: 182-183)



As Dalaipi's tirade attests, Aboriginal religion was still the region's dominant faith at this time. Most dialogue was between it and Christianity. Christianity varied considerably in its responses to this hostility. The approach of many squatters, even religious folk like the Archer brothers, was simply to exterminate whatever (and whoever) resisted their presence (Archer, 1897: 72). Likewise, the first settler of Yandina established his hut close to an Aboriginal *bora* and shot anyone who dared make his or her way to the site. On the other hand, the Methodist John Mortimer's property at Manumbar provided regular shelter to local Aboriginals. John Mortimer ran a Sunday School for Aboriginal people, and was vocal in denouncing settlers' and Native Police shootings (Prentis, 1998: 26-27).

Even Christians sincerely interested in local Aboriginals found it difficult to move beyond paternalism and condescension. Local Aboriginals were quite aware of this. When Father Duncan McNab finished conducting his missionary foray into Bribie Island in the 1870s, an elder, 'Prince Willie,' parodied the event back at camp:

There he (Prince Willie) was with an old book, from which he pretended to read, jabbering away like a parrot, and he had water at his side in which he dipped his hand, and then sprinkled the blacks he was about to name. He made the latter cross themselves, and then others he married with a ring... the blacks were simply rolling on the ground with laughter. (Petrie, 1983: 216)

The aggressive manner in which missionaries presented their faith did little to generate true dialogue. Mission reserves appeared at Bribie, Durundur (Woodford), Noosa (Lake Weyba and Laguna Bay), but converts were almost nil. In fact, inmates deserted the missions each bunya season to celebrate their ancient creed (Smith & Wood, 1878). Missions - flawed as they were- found little tolerance from settlers. Moves to establish the Lake Weyba reserve purportedly inspired local squatters to conduct the Murdering Creek massacre (c. 1858-1865), in which up to seventy Kabi men were shot. According to some, the squatters had hoped this would halt mission plans and keep the area open for selection, as most Mission attendees would be either dead or dispersed (Tutt, 1974: 83; Windolf, 2001).

In other places, presence of settlers near Aboriginal ceremonial grounds ironically ensured continued use of the sites. Matthew Carroll, the first settler of the Nambour district, resided peacefully at the local corroboree and burial ground (today's Nambour Showgrounds and Bowling Club). Carroll was the region's pioneer Catholic. Nambour's first Catholic Mass was held at his hotel. Nevertheless, he was friendly with local Aborigines. They liked inviting him and other settlers to their gatherings (Carroll n/d). Similarly, Tommy Hussey - one of the first Bribie Island settlers- made his home beside a major *bora* ground. Not only did ceremonies continue unabated, but the local Joondoonbarrie people also decorated his home with ferns when he married, and guarded his wife in his absence (Bribie Bora Ground, 1966).

Cultural and economic inter-dependency between whites and blacks also created crossovers of some sort. Most of the Sunshine Coast's first buildings and chapels were raised with Aboriginal labour. The indigenes applied traditional materials and methods to the settlers' needs (Holthouse, 1999: 71-72). Thus 'Digger's Bethel' - a fibre-sewn slab hut that was Gympie's (and the Coast's) first Christian place of worship (Tutt, 1988: 7) - was in many ways an Aboriginal building. Meanwhile, Aboriginals at Durundur (Woodford) created a Horse Corroboree in response to this new animal (Matthews, 1910: xxi).

Amidst this largely Aboriginal-Christian interchange, a trickle of non-Christian faiths now entered the Sunshine Coast. Labourers 'blackbirded' from diverse Pacific Islands were working Caboolture's cotton fields as early as 1861 (Tutt, 1992: 43). Ten years on, they had hamlets at Buderim, divided into different ethnic encampments - each group having their own particular beliefs and culture.

The presence of 'Kanakas' (Islander labourers) put local Christians face to face with a foreign belief system they neither understood nor tolerated. Words such as *su* (= 'magical object') and *mausang* (= 'sorcery') survive in Islander vernacular even today (Withers, 2000: 36), implying an enduring undercurrent of traditional Pacific beliefs on the Coast's cane fields. Dixon records "pig feasts" and the making and sailing of outrigger craft (Joseph Dixon, 1984) activities that doubtless entailed some recourse to Islander beliefs and chants. Joseph Neave, who visited the Buderim hamlets, found the Islanders "mostly heathen... spending their Sundays in swimming and fishing" (Mitchell, 1996: 35). Some even performed 'sing sings' in Brisbane (Evans, 1988: 204). Indeed, Islanders today admit there were some traditional healers/ occultists in their community well into the Twentieth Century (Budd, 2001; Oliver, 1995).

Such fragments were nevertheless swamped by the violent competition that dominated this era. Sunday school was often mandatory. The drive to convert Islanders was so earnest that Islanders soon enjoyed greater exposure to Christian theology in all its denominational variety than most Christians could boast. Some 75% of Queensland's Islanders had a Christian education by 1892 (Mercer, 1995: 10). Conversion to the Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventism and Anglican Church was particularly common.

What did 'conversion' mean in these circumstances? Recruits were often in a state of severe cultural shock, facing a spiritual vacuum with few options. Suicide and insanity were rife amongst Island labourers (Mercer, 1995: 13). None of the organisational structures that supported their traditional beliefs - the graded or secret societies and the *kula* exchange networks - ever found their way into Queensland (Mercer, 1995: 12). Elders were of no value as labourers. Their absence meant that there was no one to give instruction in traditional creeds. At any rate, the life of indentured labourers was simply too harsh and restrictive to allow much religious activity. By their own admission, many Islanders adopted Christianity as a means of improving their chances in their new home and acquiring a 'modern' education, rather than out of any real commitment.

The story was somewhat similar for the Sunshine Coast's first Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. All were impoverished, uneducated labourers with little time for practicing their faiths. Indiscriminately lumped together as 'Hindoo Coolies' in the perspective of local Christians (Singh, 2001: 184f; Singh, 2002), their economic survival was often precarious. After the 1886 repeal of the Coolie Act, most Indians fled Queensland – Sikh exiles forming a vibrant community just south of the border. However, a sprinkle of Indian labourers, farmers and hawkers continued – despite Palmwoods and Woombye farmers meeting several times between the 1890s and 1910s to devise means of excluding them from working in the area.

Being dispersed and barely tolerated, the Coast's early Asians often hid or relinquished their faith in the hope of seeming more modern and Western. These Easterners' rites of passage and dietary customs attracted comment in local newspapers - mainly as a point of ridicule – but otherwise there was no acknowledgement or understanding of their faith. Some Hindus dared practice traditional cremations (with, locals noted, loads of butter) and at least one aged man tried stubbornly to return to the Ganges to die (Lindsell, 1989: 83).

A quite different pattern of interaction accompanied the arrival of Chinese shepherds and cooks. They were already indispensable to local stations by the 1850s. To these were added Chinese gold seekers. At Gympie they ran a virtual town of 600 residents - 1600 counting visitors (Holthouse, 1999: 47, 106-108). Most were Cantonese, adhering to the usual blend of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian faiths. Being largely single young males busy trying to make a fortune, they had little interest or opportunity for dialogue with other faiths. They built no temples. The only "josshouses" in existence on the Sunshine Coast were domestic shrines (Dawson, 1985: 3).

However, the Chinese were quite resilient in Gympie. White miners used their laundries, restaurants and doctors. They relied heavily on Chinese market produce. In fact, the Chinese were the district's first farmers and introduced crops such as peanuts. Life on the gold fields thus meant continual encounters with the Chinese, and this naturally entailed encounters with elements of Chinese belief. There were complaints about the Orientals' "droll music" and heathen pageantry - the 'superstition' and inconvenience of Chinese funerals bursting through the heart of town (Chinese Funeral, 1879). Sometimes this hostility boiled over into deliberate vandalism, pillaging and expulsion of Chinese miners.

It was not just the Christians who were tainted with such belligerence. In Gympie's courts, Chinese miners angrily disputed the efficiency of Christian oaths over their own religious oaths. Some even declared Western rites "all bosh" (*Gympie Times*, 1878).

Nevertheless, Chinese religious traditions eventually became part of the Gympie lifestyle. By the 1890s it was common for Chinese shopkeepers to distribute jars of ginger to their regular white customers during Chinese New Years' festivities. White (Christian) children also partook in Chinese fireworks and kite flying on Calton Hill at that time (Dawson, 1985: 3).

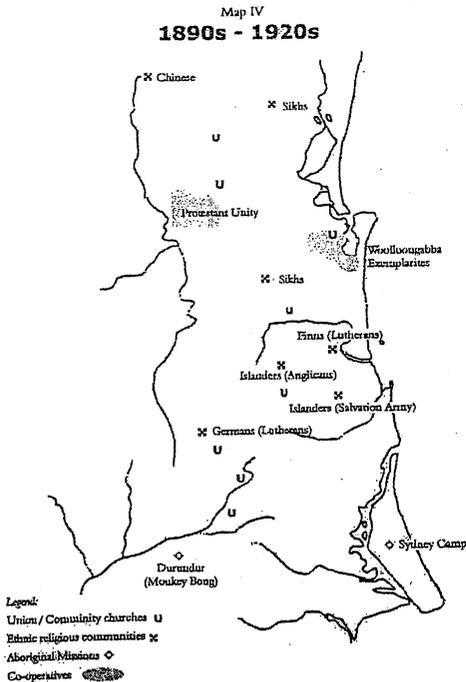
## 5. 'Small Wooden Shells' - Exclusive Enclaves (1890s - 1920s) – Map 4

If competition between Christianity and other creeds (mainly Aboriginal) marked the last two eras, 'small wooden shells' could be said to encapsulate the religious mood of the years of closer settlement (1890s - 1920s). The 1890s to 1920s saw much of the Sunshine Coast cleared and farmed. Hamlets and communities emerged in force. 'Small wooden shells' is Rev. Joseph Taiton's description of the 100 or so churches built to accompany this transformation. They formed a sharp contrast to the four tiny chapels that had been the district's only Christian centres throughout the earlier periods (Taiton c. 1983: 147).

The 'shells' enshrined community adherence to denominational differences. Much of the Coast now consisted of small religio-ethnic communities. Ethnic and creedal separateness was already marked in the previous era, but now, with nationalism and ethnic pride driving Western concerns around the globe, divisions were increasingly obvious. In fact, many of the Coast's towns were founded and maintained by particular creedal/ ethnic groups. For example, Witta near Maleny began as *Teutoberg* – the product of a group of Lutheran Germans seeking better quality land for dairy farming. They already knew each other from the Lutheran communities of the Logan River district (an outgrowth of Bethania Mission). *Sylvania* (Rosemount) and *Friend's Farm* (Buderim) consisted mostly of Scottish Quakers from the Sydney Quaker community - the 'Pitt Street faction' fleeing the troubles of the infamous schism (Mitchell, 1996: 8). *Finnburry* (Burnside) and Bli Bli were 'areas' of Lutheran Finns, most being persons who had followed Socialist Matti Kurrikka to Australia, with the aim of farming communal utopias (Koivukanges, 1986: 94). When the harsh life of wasteland farming and discrimination took its toll, many disheartened Finns tried their luck around Bli Bli instead. Equally, Kin Kin began with a particular group - Irish Catholic – in this case because Archbishop Duhig had a policy of settling Catholics along the newly-formed Queensland railway system (Dwyer, 1995: 10).

The most segregated of these 'creedal-ethnic' communities were non-Christian or non-European. 'Clusters' or 'areas' of Sikh/ Muslim/ Hindu farm labourers and travelling hawkers temporarily inhabited assigned fields at their workplace in several regions. At Mt Eerwah they even leased blocks of land (Lindsell, 1989: 83; Singh, 2002). Local Aboriginals occupied assigned areas – devised to restrain their wanderings and perhaps unconsciously to contain their 'remnant heathenism.' Thus there were the reserves of Durundur (Woodford), Sydney Camp (Bribie), Myora and Peel Island (in Moreton Bay) and Fraser Island. All of these were disbanded by the end of this period and replaced with Cherbourg, near Murgon (Tenant, 1935). Even Pacific Islanders, despite being mostly now Salvation Army or Anglican, formed recognisable communities in places such as Coes Creek and Buderim.

Apparently it was rare for such religio-ethnic communities to interact outside



of the basic requirements of rural life. Exceptions excited wide comment. In September of 1904, Gympie's Methodist minister (Rev. Youngman) decided to invite the entire Chinese community - which by then numbered only thirty to forty souls - to his church to celebrate Gympie's Anniversary. A hymn was sung in Chinese. Youngman proceeded to preach at them - making a brave and probably unintelligible attempt at Cantonese.

What is notable is that the press thought this staggering news. There were several articles and adverts concerning it. Local Chinese were equally amazed - profusely thanking the minister for being allowed to hear the sermon (*Gympie Times*, 1904).

Not all creeds were so mutually segregated. Practical realities - the region's limited pools of available labour, the lack of alternative social activities, and what Blyth calls the 'Callithumpian' (religiously ignorant) upbringing of most locals meant that people of any and every creed attended the nearest Sunday school picnic and church, regardless of its denomination (Blyth, 1994: 34). If a choice was available - particularly for Protestants versus Catholics - then such mixing was out of the question, but it is intriguing that it occurred at all.

Likewise, it often happened that persons of one denomination would help build the church of another denomination. The Quakers of Rosemount donated the timber for Nambour's Methodist and Salvation Army places of worship (Mitchell, 1996). This 'dialogue in action' may explain similarities in the materials and design of many of the Coast's earliest churches. As elsewhere in Australia, they tended to be undecorated - tongue-and-groove 'boxes' without ceilings or lining.

Perhaps this consistency was also due to Masonic input. Catholics complained in local papers of what they viewed as the hegemony of the Masonic-Protestant bloc over all avenues of local government, business and job opportunities. The situation had parallels in developments elsewhere in Australia, but it is worth pondering that so many of the Coast's major administrators, businessmen and church leaders were Masons. At least in the secrecy of the Lodge, they were required to bury their denominational differences. Did this influence the nature of local Christianity and its arts? In some places Masonic Lodges were built

earlier than churches. In Yandina, Belli and Eumundi their Lodges were actually larger and more numerous than churches. Gympie alone had seven Masonic Lodges.

A degree of inter-denominational camaraderie at any rate flourished through what were known as Union or Community Churches. Around rural Australia at the turn of the century and even today, remote communities temporarily shelved their religious differences in order to build halls they could use for worship. About a dozen such Union churches flourished on the Coast between the 1890s and 1920s.

Such churches seem to be heralds of dialogue, but in fact, their references to unity were largely expedient. According to its stated aim, Peachester Union Church was “open to all denominations” (History Committee, 1998: 11). Yandina Union Church was likewise “for the use of all denominations” (Taiton, c.1983: 147). However, persons of particular denominations utilized the hall only at set times rather than all together. Catholics and Orthodox Christians were mostly not included under the designation “all denominations.”

Even so, some Union churches may have reflected interdenominational yearnings. The small booklets commemorating the anniversaries of these churches usually note that the local community ‘could see no sense’ in building separate halls for each group. In most cases there were simply too few representatives of each denomination to justify such a splurge of building. Local farmers, whatever their creedal background, simply had to work together if they wanted a church hall at all.

This very predicament seems to have given the Coast’s residents a lot of food for thought. When Francis Dunlop donated his land for the site of the Maleny Union Church, he specifically requested that the hall be used towards “religious unity.” (Hankinson, 1978: 20) What this meant for him is difficult to ascertain. Did Mr Dunlop, like the founders of *Brightside* guesthouse (at nearby Mt. Mellum) have Rosicrucian leanings? Was he simply fed up with inter-denominational bickering?

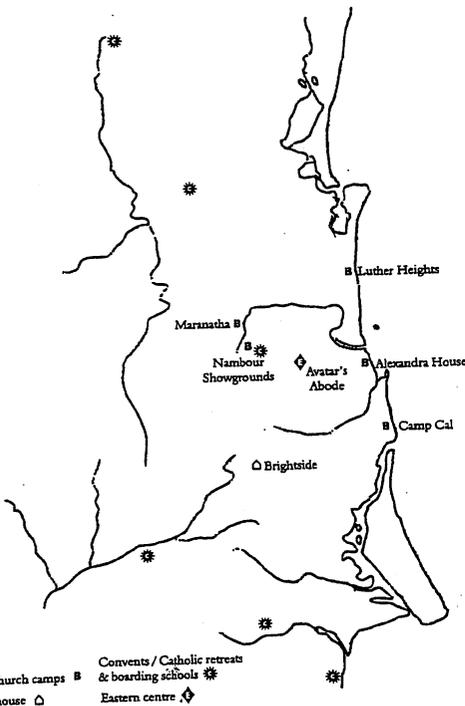
## 6. Uniformity (1920s - 1950s) – Map 5

We can describe the next phase of local inter-faith dialogue as a type of forced conformity. Around Australia, two World Wars and the Cold War heightened the quest for a secure, monotone identity. In its wake came a certain religious conservatism. The tide of conflict also excited anti-Turk, anti-German, anti-East European and anti-Japanese sentiments. In this climate, many persons of migrant blood preferred to hide their origins. Towns changed their names: Teutoberg became Witta; Sylvania became Rosemount; Finnburry became Burnside. Local Lutherans stopped reading, using or even looking German in their churches. Many families changed their surnames. Indians and even Aborigines denied their heritage and pretended to be Mediterranean. Button Singh- son of a Mt Eerwah Sikh – dropped turban and beard to join the Cooran Rugby team, and the Youngs (a major Chinese family of Gympie) took up English names and Christian faith (Andrew, c.1986).

At times this attitude amounted to what could only be called religious vandalism. Whereas previously many Aboriginal sites had been preserved as ethnological curiosities, many were now neglected and destroyed. In an event perhaps symbolic of the atmosphere of these times, a bulldozer in 1956 was employed to cut a walking path up Mt Coolum. The dozer broke up the large Aboriginal 'healing rock' there. The rock was well known to the locals, but it was now regarded as standing in the way of 'progress' (Tutt, 1986: 66).

Perhaps the most poignant instance of uniformity concerned the Coast's 'invisible Muslims.' Between the 1940s and 1960s, quite a number of Albanian and Yugoslav migrants lived and worked on the farms and forests around Caboolture, Glasshouse Mountains, Beerwah, Jimna and Kenilworth (Cohen, 2000: 128-129; Braho, 2001: 44). Fresh from War-torn Europe, this group included many Muslims. A small percentage was Orthodox Christian. Some, such as the Mackay family, were even descendants of Afghan cameleers. As Jones found generally with Albanian Muslims in Australia during this period, most were "isolated, sad and lonely" – living very basically and lacking contact with other Muslims (Jones, 1993: 83-5). Suffering lack of understanding and anti-Turkish sentiment in the surrounding community, many denied their faith and pretended to be Greek Orthodox (Mackay, 2001). Thereafter, most lapsed in their religious commitment, becoming secularised Australians (Mackay, 2001).

Map V  
1920s - 1960s



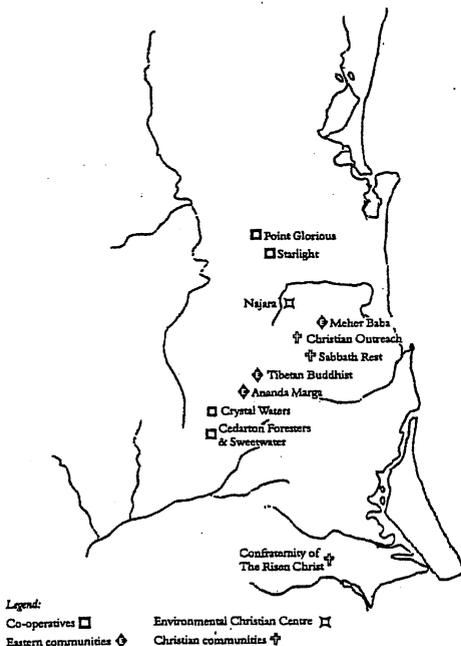
At the same time, however, other developments were enriching local diversity. Starting in Europe and then North America in the 1910s and 1920s, 'outdoor' camps became a popular vehicle for Christian learning and youth activities in many churches. The trend spread to Australia, where the Sunshine Coast's natural assets quickly favoured it as a setting for several large Christian camps, convents, retreats and conference centres between the 1920s and 1950s. These attracted their own type of diversity by hosting Aboriginal and Pacific Island mission children (Nelson, 1966). Equally, the growth of the Sunshine Coast's hamlets into towns increased the range of all kinds of organizations, including religious organizations. Thus it is then that the Coast's first Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists and Spiritualists appeared.

## 7. Individualism (1950s - 1980s) – Map 6

By the late 1950s, some artists and writers were openly dabbling in diverse religious traditions, bringing a new individualism into the local 'uniformity.' This was partly in response to similar (Beatnik and Hippy) 'dabbings' in the USA and Great Britain, and partly due to Australia's increasing contact with Asia. We can style this era as one wherein individual, 'personalised' blendings of diverse spiritual influences began to be tolerated- at first amongst artists and eventually amongst youth in general.

Perhaps the best example is Ian Fairweather (1891- 1974) - one of Australia's most influential post-impressionists. Fairweather spent much of his artistic career on Bribie Island. He had been visiting the spot since 1945, and now sought to retire to a hut deep in the bush, in the manner of a Chinese hermit artist. This was deliberate, for Fairweather was a profoundly religious figure. Indeed, his most famous works were the 'Religious Group series,' completed between 1961 and 1963 on Bribie Island. Fairweather espoused a personal fusion of Buddhist, Taoist, Aboriginal and Christian beliefs (Croucher, 1988: 60), which he expressed by blending the broad strokes of Zen ink painting with the earthy immediacy of Aboriginal art and the repeated themes of Christian art: *the Last Supper, Ave Maria, Mother and Child* (Bail, 1968: 170-172). These works had a profound influence on the direction of Australian art.

Map VI  
1960s - 1980s



Meanwhile at Woombye there lived an eccentric poet who is today arousing increasing interest: Francis Brabazon (see, for example, the biographical study by Keating, 2003). Brabazon had been *Shaikh* of Australia's first Sufi Society - begun by Baron von Frankenburg at Camden - before living in India with the 'Love Man' Meher Baba (1894-1969). The latter was one of the most popular Gurus of the Hippy generation. In 1958, Brabazon bought a property on the summit of Keils Mountain (Woombye) and established one the Meher Baba movement's three world centres: Avatar's Abode. Today there are hundreds of Meher Baba centres around the globe and some one million adherents (Castelino, 1998: 25). Meher Baba himself stayed at Avatar's Abode, which probably makes him the first Indian guru to visit Queensland (Le Page, 1993). 1998: 25).

Brabazon, like Fairweather, was an eclectic eccentric. During the 1930s - 1940s, he was part of a select group of painters attempting to forge a new modernist style of Australian art. His work was being exhibited alongside Nolan, Tucker and Boyd. Brabazon's cultural passions were further inflamed by his life in India, where he studied and wrote *ghazals*. Into the 1970s, Brabazon was using Avatar's Abode as a base for blending the devotional (religious) writings and music of Western, Asian, African and other traditions. Hundreds of 60s youth frequented Brabazon's property at this time. Many went on to become Meher Baba devotees and actors, musicians or poets in their own right, bent on embodying Brabazon's multi-faith slant.

By that stage, young people were inundating the Sunshine Coast's beaches and rainforests with their highly personal and spiritually eclectic quests for 'inner meaning.' 60s youth displayed this trend everywhere in the Western world, but the Sunshine Coast played a particularly crucial role, quickly becoming an epicentre of Australian Alternative activity (Lindblad, 1976). Its communes inspired Peter Carey's film *Bliss* (Holmes, 2002) and some of Peter Cock's *Alternative Australia* (Cock, 1979: 26-27, 132-134).

Through the Hippys and Alternative lifestyle people there emerged – as in California - an eclectic spirituality that still dominates much of the Sunshine Coast hinterland. It is especially noticeable in the artists and crafts persons that stayed on and established themselves in the region. Alternative communes (*Crystal Waters, Starlight, Sweetwater, Cedarton Foresters*, etc.) and the young people moving about the Sunshine Coast proved open to most forms of spirituality. Most Buddhist and Hindu schools first entered the region through these people. Amongst the first (1973-1974) and still largest groups were Tibetan Buddhism, Baha'i and Transcendental Meditation.

The 'Tibetan group' proved particularly central in this local development. Growing from a handful of Alternates who had frequented Dharmasala and had established a relationship with Tibetan lamas there, they launched the first Tibetan Buddhist retreat in the Southern Hemisphere. This was in 1973 at Diamond Valley near Mooloolah. From that base, Australia's first and most comprehensive Tibetan Buddhist centre was established: *Chenrezig Institute* at Eudlo (Crosbie, 2002).

As with other Eastern groups making their first inroads into the area (*Sokka Gakkai, Ananda Marga, Sattya Sai*), Tibetan Buddhists initially found themselves treated with considerable suspicion and hostility by the local (largely Christian) farming people. Each aspect of their lifestyle and what they wanted to do with their land – vegetarianism, revegetation, non-violence to animal life, temple-building – was viewed as strange and misguided by neighbouring farmers (Crosbie, 2002). All these Eastern groups tended to be lumped together as 'dangerous cults' – especially after the Hilton bombing. However, it is worth noting that after two or three decades, Tibetan Buddhism and *Chenrezig* commanded the respect and support of many non-Buddhist locals. Today, *Chenrezig* is a tourist magnet for the Caloundra Shire, whilst the educational

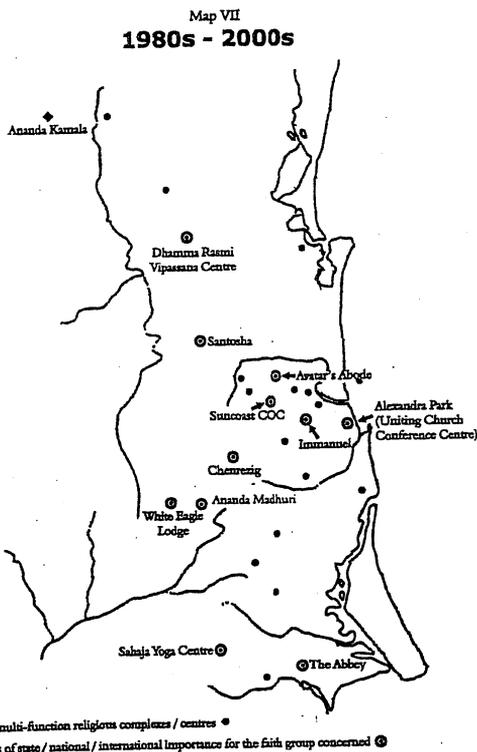
system at the Ananda Marga *River School* (Maleny) has the support of parents from many parts of the Sunshine Coast, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Alternative-based, personalised blendings of diverse spiritualities even made their impact on Christian centres during this time. Many local churches recall the 70s as a period in which their congregations broke out of old patterns and adopted approaches that were more experimental and more inclusive of the general community (Westbrook, 2002). The only *Orthodox Church of Christ the King* community in the Southern Hemisphere - a branch of 'old Catholics' who followed the mystic writer John S. Ward (1885-1949) - established itself at St. Michaels ('The Abbey') near Toorbul in the early 1960s, after the community had wandered, Moses-like, through Cyprus, Egypt, and Sri Lanka.

The Abbey added to local multi-faith dialogue not only by the wealth of relics and culture it brought from England, but also by its members' active involvement in the local Caboolture community, and by their openness to Eastern concepts and practises. Similarly, the Catholic (Sisters of Mercy) ecological retreat *Najara*, established near Nambour in 1977, embraced Alternative design (the chapel, for example, is a dome, built underground) and features tile work with Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist symbols. It acknowledges Indigenous spirituality through pieces such as its Reconciliation Fountain. Apart from this cultural acknowledgement of other faiths, the Catholic centre is used by Yoga and Zen groups for various meetings and classes.

## 8. Multi-faith Eclecticism (1980s - Today) – Map 7

The latest development in the Sunshine Coast's religious history relates to the migration of large numbers of people into this area over the last two decades. This is part of the 'sea change' phenomenon that is altering the human landscape



of much of Australia. As in the previous two periods, such increase naturally brings with it a greater diversity of religious choices, especially as the incoming population is itself extremely diverse. Ethnic diversity here doubled in five years (1996-2001), to the point that the Sunshine Coast now boasts the greatest multicultural diversity of any Australian region – sixty-one nationalities in the Maroochy Shire alone. Most of this diversity is concentrated around the Maroochydoore-Buderim-Nambour area (*Community Centres for People*, 1996; *Communities Alive*, 2002: 1-2).

At first glance, this increased diversity does little to aid multi-faith dialogue. Incoming groups are mostly invisible, being highly dispersed and individually tiny (Babacan, 2002). Just one to five persons represent some nationalities (Parez, 2001). Despite their varied

racial origin, most newcomers are already 'Westernized' Christians (Parez, 2001). Others are transient - resident students attached to campuses, as in the case of local Japanese and Nepalese (Howard & Sherpa, 2001). However, ethnic 'invisibility' belies what is really happening (Babacan, 2002). In actuality, the comfortable socio-economic standing and success of these people within mainstream Sunshine Coast society has empowered them to instil ever-greater multi-faith and multicultural awareness into local churches and secular administrations.

This is not to suggest that the Coast's Christian population is thereby increasingly interested in inter-faith dialogue. Many – perhaps most - sectors remain entrenched in conservative Christian ideals represented by denominations such as the Christian Outreach Centres. It is no accident that during the 'Joh years' the Sunshine Coast won renown as a politically active 'Bible belt' (Furler, 1987a: 2; Furler, 1987b: 4). Greatest growth – and most of the larger, more influential church complexes – aligns strongly with evangelical and Charismatic movements.

Perhaps, though, this development is itself little more than local traditionalism - holding out 'against the odds.' Certainly the leaders, pastors and key families of the evangelical/ charismatic centres are predominantly children and grandchildren of locals who pioneered Pentecostalism here in the 1920s and 1930s (Westbrook, 2002). These in turn are descendants of the first (largely Methodist or Lutheran) settlers. In other words, Pentecostals and fundamentalist Christians on the Sunshine Coast could be viewed as the latest manifestation of the district's pioneer creed. This is obvious in the art they support and produce - notably for the recent *Centenary of Federation* activities. Although strongly reflecting contemporary culture, many of their church halls perpetuate the functionalism that characterised the region's religious art and architecture a hundred years ago.

What is intriguing is that despite the generally non-inclusive nature of these churches, they have taken a leading role in interfacing with Judaism around the state. Members of the huge Nambour AOG church were instrumental in forming Jewish support groups. During the mid-1980s, they made their church the Australian headquarters for international Jewish-Christian interface groups such as WIZO and the Christian Embassy Jerusalem (Shepherd, 2002).

Again, we can see this being expressed in cultural/ artistic ventures. There are groups such as the *Sunshine Coast Christian Quilters* producing ornate banners blending evangelical Christian and Jewish imagery. Others are involved in the national Jewish-Christian festival - *Celebration Shalom* - wherein Jewish Rabbis are keynote speakers. An entire line of Jewish-Christian music and performing arts is emerging, embodied in groups such as the *Machaneh Dance Company*. The latter originated amongst Charismatic Christians of Nambour and Woombye. They offer a meeting of traditional Jewish and modern Christian dance, with which they toured Eastern Europe ('On the Move...', 2001: 1).

Amongst the Sunshine Coast's non-Judaic religions,<sup>2</sup> the drive towards multi-faith offerings is even more marked. This is due, in no small part, to how these creeds were introduced here during the 1990s. Almost all entered with the same sector that promoted non-Western faiths in the last period: 'Alternatively-inclined,' middle class (and now mostly middle-aged) Australians of European (and thereby Christian) descent. Some were already resident in the area, but many represent a new wave of migrants from the southern capitals.

Thus even in arriving, Eastern schools were generally channelled through Western vessels on the Sunshine Coast, and to this day these groups' following is composed largely of white Australians rather than migrant Asians. These 'Western converts to the East' - perhaps because they themselves have had to straddle two religio-cultural worlds - also seem to be the driving force behind the Sunshine Coast's multi-faith ventures. Although it is true that in the last few years some Catholic and Anglican congregations have established multi-faith fellowships (most notably St. Mary's Anglican in Montville) the bulk of the Coast's inter-faith discussion groups, festivals, forums, art exhibitions and performances can be traced back to Australian converts - notably Baha'is, Ananda Margis, Sattya Sai followers and Meher Baba followers. For example, it is an Alternative-oriented Australian couple based in Woombye who began the multi-faith *Sacred Music*

*Festival*, which now tours all Australia. They profess Tibetan Buddhist and Meher Baba beliefs. Likewise, an Australian (Anglo-Saxon) convert to Islam based at Beerburrum initiated the University of Sunshine Coast's Inter-faith group (Hashemi, 2003).

It is perhaps too soon to know what these activities will signify. We can, however, note that a growing number of the Sunshine Coast's leading artists and art groups are engaged in styles that combine elements drawn from many faiths - Western, Indigenous and New Age spiritualities. A good example of this is the *Barn'o'Vart* workshop in Yandina. Although its key inspiration is Tibetan Buddhist art,<sup>3</sup> its artists (notably Adrienne Strong and Nikki Wright) also refer to contemporary Western kitsch, American and even Indigenous styles and genres.

Two outstanding artists in this emerging 'multi-faith tradition' are Maleny-based artist Nan Patterson and Indian-born Nambour artist Frank Wesley. Patterson combines Renaissance Christian imagery with occult and Chinese religious symbolism. Wesley's work is even more inclusive. His *Churinga* applies an Aboriginal concept to Moses' experience of Yahweh (Wray, 1993: 214). In another work, *Rich Young Ruler*, Wesley portrays a parable of Jesus in the manner of Rajasthani miniatures, but using the medium and style of Japanese Buddhist silk painting (Wray, 1993: 206).

Although Frank Wesley occasionally worked on Islamic, Hindu and Aboriginal themes, most of his art presents Christian stories through the medium of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. This is precisely where it has been contentious and incomprehensible to many Christian viewers: employing the sacred arts of non-Christians to send a Christian message. For example, his *Annunciation* attracted a lot of criticism from Christians because it adopted a Hindu gesture- Angel Gabriel touching Mary's feet in homage. Even so, Wesley's work must in some manner have expressed what many Sunshine Coast residents wanted to see, for his exhibitions during the 1970s and 1980s quickly sold out-often to local cane farmers (Wesley, 2003).

Wesley's and Patterson's eclecticism is of vital interest if only because these artists are international figures. Wesley, for example, painted the first UNICEF card and won Papal awards for his art. He and Patterson are already inspiring a number of locals. Thus they may represent the start of an on-going trend - a new artistic culture based on a blending of spiritual genres.

In this respect it is perhaps prophetic that some of the greatest growth in spiritual groups on the Sunshine Coast has been amongst those that combine diverse spiritualities. This is especially obvious in the upsurge of what we might term 'folk religion' or 'healing' groups - Spiritualist/ Psychic, New Age, Neo-Pagan, American Indian and Hawaiian. These now have thriving churches, centres and retreats around the Sunshine Coast- *Santosh* at Cooloolabin, the vast *Aloha Mana Hawaiian Health Retreat* at Buderim; *Brightside* at Mt. Mellum, *White Eagle Lodge* at Maleny- which is White Eagle's Australasian headquarters; *Hillspirits* near Kin Kin, and many others.

Rejecting categorisation into the major religious traditions, such groups and centres are increasingly appealing to the local population. In their practices, beliefs

and even their décor, such groups represent a meeting of diverse religious influences. For example, *Santosh* has an 'altar to the Divine Mother' on which sits Chinese, Hindu and Christian figures. Likewise, Minnie Mace - a local Indigenous healer - makes constant reference in her talks and pamphlets to ancient Egyptian and New Age concepts (Goddard-Roles, 1994: 6).

Once again, this direction is spilling over into the nature of local art and culture. There are art groups such as *Allegria* group (Ziggi Cairns, Lyn Fellowes and others) who constantly combine references to Native American, Celtic, and Judaeo-Christian traditions in their work. Their art and craft workshops are extremely popular on the Sunshine Coast. There are also events such as *Woodford Folk Festival* and the *Multicultural Extravaganza (Festuri)* at Sippy Downs. These draw, respectively, 90,000 and 10,000 visitors each year to their blended pluralities. The Woodford festival's extremely popular *Fire Event* owes much to the ritual theatrics and iconography of the Celtic, Hindu-Buddhist and African spiritualities which its creator (Neil Cameron) deliberately blends, yet at the same time it moves beyond these to an expression of its own. It is this kind of amalgam that we can expect to become increasingly prominent on the Sunshine Coast in coming decades. What it portends for the nature of religious belief is difficult to predict, yet it does bespeak a growing ease with the mores and metaphors of diverse spiritual traditions.

## 9. Conclusions

If Sunshine Coast history is at all typical of Australian regions, we can conclude that our local neighbourhoods were probably always multi-faith, in the sense that every area has had some representatives of diverse groups whose religious beliefs were - at the time - sharply distinguished from one another, whether denominationally, tribally/ ethnically or as distinct world faiths. The greatest shift does not appear to be the sudden appearance of diversity but rather the changing identity of the 'main players' and the changing nature of their dialogue.

For a long time, the 'main players' on the Sunshine Coast were Aboriginal religion and a few varieties of Christianity. Dialogue between these groups moved from initial curiosity and cautious respect into violent competition, by which time Asian and other faiths had entered the debate. Hostilities were eventually (into the 1890s) entrenched in distinct religio-ethnic enclaves. Many of these enclaves were themselves submerged by the need for patriotic solidarity during the first half of the Twentieth Century. This gave the Sunshine Coast an appearance of uniformity during that era. However, faith diversity re-emerged from the late 1950s, steadily increasing into the current situation, wherein a wide spectrum of faiths now flourishes.

Throughout these changes, there were always filaments of broader unity, often supplied from unexpected quarters (for example, labour shortage and the local prominence of Masonic Orders). The Coast's various spiritual centres were once bastions of distinct faith identities, but in recent years they have become instrumental in forging multi-faith links. Equally, the region's artists, performing artists and art groups (many associated with particular Sunshine Coast spiritual

centres) seem to be creating a mode of art and culture that merges the currents of the Sunshine Coast's diverse faiths.

Perhaps one of the strongest points to emerge from this study is that even at a local level, Australians have a multi-faith heritage that shaped much of their identity. Today's Sunshine Coast is a direct result of Quaker initiatives (the town of Buderim, the sugar industry), 'heathen' Islander labour, Chinese market gardeners, Salvation Army evangelism (which founded Cottontree- the Coast's first beach resort), and a host of other ingredients that relate, directly or indirectly, to the presence and interaction of diverse religions.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. The term 'Sunshine Coast' is here used in the broadest sense- what was formerly called 'the North Coast Region.' This embraces the surf coasts from Bribie Island north to Cooloola. It also includes associated hinterlands from Caboolture and Woodford north to Gympie and Manumbar.
- <sup>2</sup>. Compared to the five or six non-Christian faiths present in the region by the mid-1980s, the area now has at least thirteen varieties of Hinduism, five different Buddhist schools, a couple of Muslim groups and a host of other faiths.
- <sup>3</sup>. The founders were strongly associated with the Chenrezig Institute.

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