

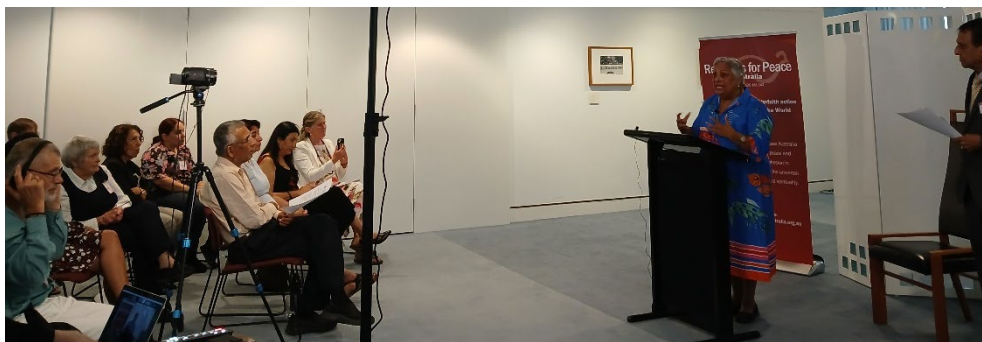
## **Religions for Peace Australia World Interfaith Harmony Week Event Report**

### **Acknowledging Respect and Inclusion of Indigenous Nations Spirituality**

*Held 5<sup>th</sup> February 2025, at Parliament House Canberra, Australia and Online*

Each year for World Interfaith Harmony Week, Religions for Peace (RfP) Australia (supported by the Canberra Interfaith Forum) hosts a lecture at Parliament House on an important issue related to interfaith harmony. This year, RfP Australia and the Canberra Interfaith Forum were honoured to host a compelling lecture by Professor Dr. Anne Pattel-Gray, a distinguished First Nations scholar, theologian, and advocate for Indigenous rights from the Bidjara nation in Queensland, Australia, on the significance of acknowledging and respecting Indigenous spirituality within Australia's multicultural and multifaith landscape.

Professor Pattel-Gray's lecture explored the historical marginalisation of First Nations peoples, the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal spirituality, and the importance of truth-telling in forging a more inclusive and respectful national identity. She emphasised the necessity of recognising Indigenous spirituality as a fundamental part of Australia's cultural and religious heritage. Professor Pattel-Gray encouraged people reflect on their role in fostering greater intercultural and interfaith respect.



### **Brief Background to First Nations Australians**

First Nations Australians, comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have inhabited the continent for at least 65,000 years, with some evidence suggesting arrival as early as 80,000 years ago. They migrated from Southeast Asia via land bridges and sea crossings, developing complex societies with over 250 languages and diverse cultural practices. At the time of European colonisation in 1788, there were approximately 260 distinct language groups and 500 dialects, with each group having its own territory and spiritual connection to the land. Colonisation brought violence, displacement, and the loss of cultural practices, as Indigenous Australians were forcibly removed from their lands and

subjected to massacres and disease, leading to significant population decline and cultural disruption. The legacy of colonisation continues to affect Indigenous Australians today, with ongoing disparities in health, education, and justice.

In October 2023, Australia held a constitutional referendum on a proposed Australian Indigenous Voice to Parliament ('the Voice'). The Voice referendum aimed to provide a constitutional advisory body for Indigenous Australians, intended to address these historical injustices and systemic disadvantages by ensuring Indigenous voices are heard in policymaking. However, the referendum to establish this Voice failed, highlighting ongoing challenges in achieving reconciliation and representation for First Nations peoples. RfP Australia and its network strongly supported the Voice and, along with many other Australians and the majority of First Nations peoples, were deeply saddened and distressed at the failure of the referendum.

## The Importance of Inviting a First Nations Speaker

It was in this context that RfP Australia again reached out to a First Nations leader to invite them to give a lecture at Parliament House for World Interfaith Harmony Week. Professor Pattel-Gray decided the topic of the lecture, and her words at the event reflected the urgent need for action and support for First Nations peoples and their spiritualities in the wake of the failed referendum.

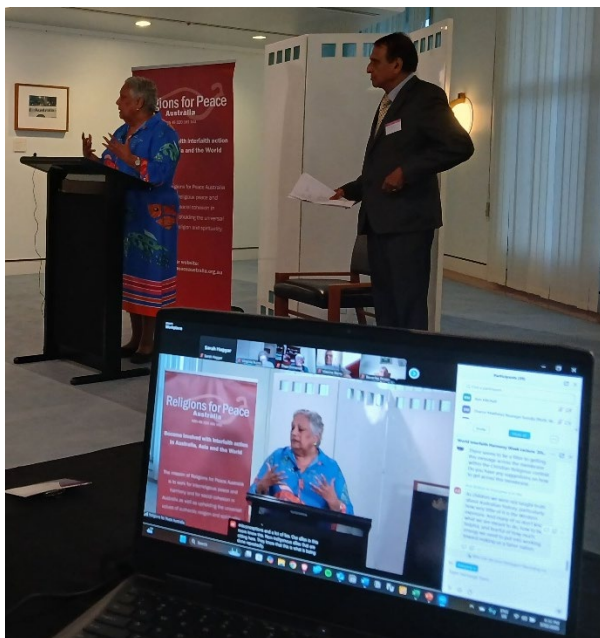


Figure 1. Professor Anne Pattel-Gray (left) speaking to the audience during the Q&A session, which is being run by Mr Dean Sahu Khan OAM (right), Chairperson of the Canberra Interfaith Forum. In the foreground is a computer with the online stream of the event.

Held at Parliament House, the event provided an opportunity to raise awareness among politicians and diplomats about the need for greater engagement with First Nations spiritualities. This event served as a critical platform for fostering dialogue and understanding between faith communities, policymakers, and the broader public. In-person attendees included academics, politicians, diplomats, religious leaders, and laypeople. Approximately 60 participants joined online from across Australia. The online component allowed for national participation, with attendees joining from diverse locations across Australia. The in-person turnout was complemented by a vibrant post-event gathering where attendees shared reflections over food and drink.

Attendees were given time to discuss the lecture with each other, to provide time for thoughtful reflection and questions.

Participants reflected on what Professor Pattel-Gray's talk meant to them, and wanted to know what they could do moving forward:

*"I am wondering about how better to be in solidarity and allyship as a non-Aboriginal person to highlight and promote Aboriginal culture and spirituality in places where so much has been lost and is being lost through the harms of colonialism? For example forced movement, language suppression, Stolen Generations, deaths of elders who carried the stories..."*

*“As children, we were not taught the truth about Australian history, particularly how very little of it is the Western exposure. And many of us don't know what we are meant to do, how to be helpful, and we are fearful of how much energy we need to put into working toward making us a fairer nation.”*



## **Audience Engagement and Testimonies**

The lecture was followed by an engaging Q&A session, where attendees expressed their appreciation for the depth of knowledge shared by Professor Pattel-Gray. Below are some testimonies and questions from participants:

*“Thank you for your brilliant, generous-hearted sharing, Professor Anne! Thank you for the challenge for truth-telling and unification of people of faith.”*

*“Part of our task is to learn about our shared history and the impacts of colonial behaviour on First Nations people. However, some reconciliation groups in Melbourne have discussed the many aspects of Aboriginal culture that will lead us to a better future. Ideas like 'we must look after each other'; 'just take what you need'; 'care for Country'.”*

*“Thank you, Anne. I look forward to reading the transcript of your talk to help me work out and gain the courage to move forward.”*

*“Thank you, Professor Anne, I'm very grateful to be able to join this event and equally grateful for your time and honest sharing.”*

*“Thank you for making this meeting possible.”*

*“Thank you, organisers and participants all.”*

*“Thank you everyone, for your company for this important step of the journey forward.”*

Throughout Professor Pattel-Gray's lecture, and through the thoughtful and reflective group discussions and Q&A session, four key themes and areas of impact became clear:

**Truth-Telling and Reconciliation:** Professor Pattel-Gray underscored the importance of acknowledging historical injustices and recognising the spiritual and cultural contributions of Aboriginal peoples.

**Decolonising Theology:** The lecture challenged mainstream religious narratives and advocated for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in theological discourse.

**Building Interfaith and Intercultural Understanding:** Participants gained valuable insights into how Aboriginal spirituality intersects with Australia's broader religious diversity.

**Policy and Social Change:** The discussion highlighted actionable steps for faith communities and policymakers to support Indigenous-led initiatives.

## **Outcomes and Future Initiatives**

The event had a strong impact on attendees, sparking discussions on how institutions, faith groups, and communities can better incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their practices. A particularly significant moment occurred during the Q&A session when Professor Pattel-Gray emphasised the importance of engaging with First Nations people on Country. Professor Pattel-Gray asked us all, as faith leaders, to come and 'sit on Country' and talk with First Nations communities in their own environments to foster greater understanding and connection. This sparked conversations on how Religions for Peace Australia could take concrete steps toward deeper collaboration.

As a direct outcome of the event, RfP Australia has begun setting up meetings with Professor Pattel-Gray to discuss the logistics of engaging with First Nations communities on Country. An action plan is being formulated to:

- Support First Nations peoples in Australia through advocacy and collaboration.
- Include more representatives from First Nations communities in the multifaith work of Religions for Peace Australia.
- Ensure better representation of Indigenous spiritualities in interfaith discussions and initiatives.

This initiative aligns with broader national efforts such as the Voice to Parliament, truth-telling commissions, and reconciliation processes. Over the past few years, RfP Australia has made it a priority to increase engagement with First Nations peoples and enhance their representation within its programs and leadership structures.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

At the end of the lecture and question time, RfP Australia asked Bishop Philip Huggins to summarise and provide concluding thoughts. Bishop Huggins provided a thoughtful reflection on the lecture by Professor Pattel-Gray, demonstrating this as a significant milestone in advancing conversations on respect, inclusion, and reconciliation within Australia's multicultural and multifaith context. Professor Pattel-Gray's words reinforced the urgent need for truth-telling and recognition of Indigenous spirituality as integral to the nation's identity.

To further demonstrate RfP Australia's commitment to this work, Bishop Huggins discussed the work RfP Australia is doing to set up a Multifaith Council of Australia, a national peak body whose aim would be to facilitate multifaith discussions across Australia led by national faith leaders committed to harmony and social cohesion.

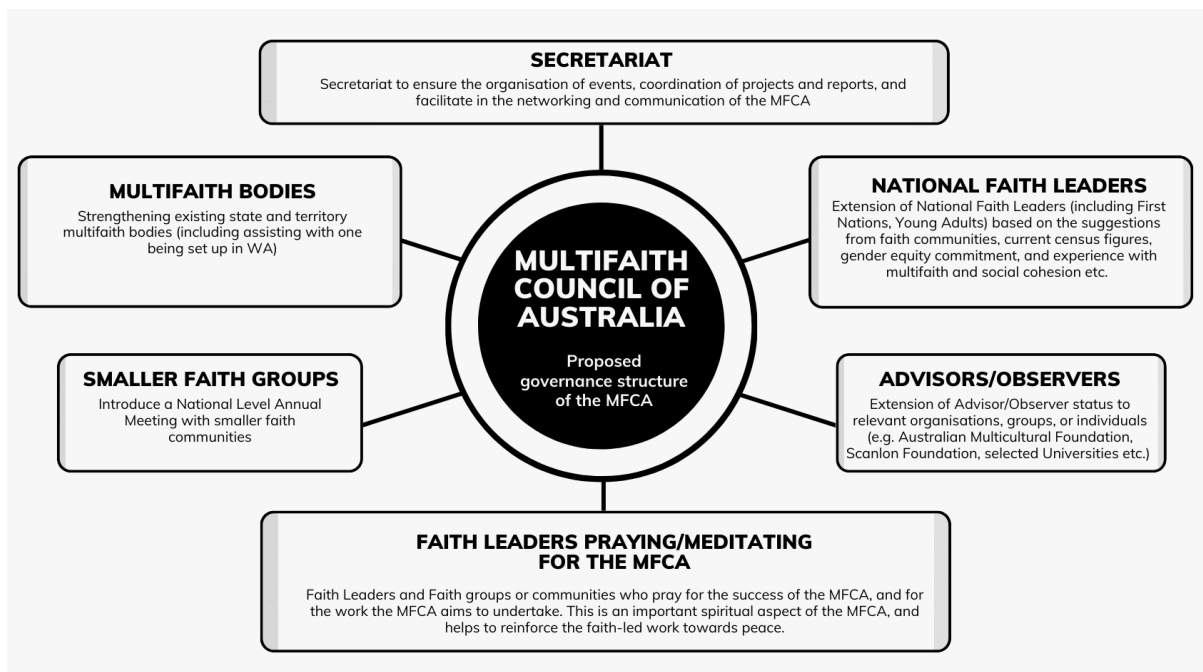


Figure 2. Proposed governance structure of the Multifaith Council of Australia

By hosting this event at Parliament House, RfP Australia aimed to show ongoing support for Professor Pattel-Gray and the issues about which she spoke. Similarly, we aimed to demonstrate RfP Australia as a leader in fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The overwhelming support and engagement from attendees highlighted the importance of this conversation and demonstrated the appetite for further action in this space.

## Further Information

There is a link to the video of the event on our [RfP Australia website](https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/?p=20219), also accessible on [YouTube](#) or the [Multifaith Council of Australia website](https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/?p=19925). Closely managed by our Webmaster, Rev. Chris Parnell, the RfP Australia website received 11 million hits in 2024. Along with email, our website is our primary means of communicating with our network. The event link will be shared with our network and sent out with a complementary worksheet to encourage in-depth engagement.

## Other links

**RfP Australia Website:** <https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/?p=20219>

**Event page:** <https://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/?p=19925>

**Booking link:** <https://www.trybooking.com/events/landing/1332323>

**Media:** <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/sundayextra/world-interfaith-conference/104882670>

**YouTube link:** <https://youtu.be/lXIPWkuU9C8?si=GaPT7cLkbjD6ea4C>



Figure 3. Members of Religions for Peace Australia and the Canberra Interfaith Forum pose for a picture with Professor Anne Pattel-Gray (centre)

## Lecture Abstract and Guest Speaker Biography

### **Acknowledging Respect and Inclusion of Indigenous Nations Spirituality: In a Nation that Embraces Many Diverse Cultures and Faiths**

#### **Abstract**

Australia is proud of its multicultural nation that boasts 270 ethnic groups. Australia is considered a secular country with a diverse migrant and refugee population with over 120 faiths. Yet Australia has traditionally been a majority Christian country that has largely ignored, oppressed and marginalised its First Nations peoples. As an Aboriginal woman, I am proudly from the Bidjara nation [in QLD] with a connection to a country that predates British invasion and colonisation. How do we forge a nation based on the truth that includes and shows respect to First Nations people, recognises our Spirituality and culture, and embraces our ancient knowledge? There is a critical need in Australia for a greater understanding of each other's cultural and religious differences. This will enable us to find common ground and build stronger relationships that allow respect for each other to grow.

## Guest Speaker Biography

Professor Dr Anne Pattel-Gray is a scholar, theologian, activist, prolific writer, and a nationally and internationally renowned Aboriginal leader. The former Head of the School of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne's University of Divinity, Professor Pattel-Gray earned her Ph.D. in 1995 from the University of Sydney in the Studies of Religion with a focus on Aboriginal Religion and Spirituality and was awarded a Doctor of Divinity from India in 1997. She is a recognised expert in



de-colonising biblical narratives and developing Indigenous theology, and brings significant insights into the cultural knowledge and religious life of Aboriginal people, and the impact of colonisation and missionisation on First Nations peoples of Australia. Professor Pattel-Gray has a long history of advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples.