



## ***QAR PROJECT UPDATE 5: December 2021***

As we approach the end of a difficult 2021, we hope you enjoy this update on research for the Queensland Atlas of Religion, a project between the University of Queensland and the State Library of Queensland, supported by the Australian Research Council.

We last sent out an Update back in May/June, which seems like quite a long time ago now!

Initially it was planned to have three Updates issued each year, but like everyone we have faced the challenges to international and interstate travel posed by the pandemic. As a result, this year has seen a slower rollout of the various research activities in the project than was originally planned. With the higher degree students now all having commenced (see below) and a number of important planning aspects now in place, we look forward to a full quota of three Updates appearing during 2022 and 2023 as the project nears completion.

You will probably have received this through our mailing list. If you are not on our mailing list, please contact us via the details below and we look forward to welcoming your input.

### **Community Reference Group**

New contributors and interested parties are very welcome to become involved, either through writing content, contributing to data or source collection, or by joining the Community Reference Group. Please email either Geoff Ginn ([g.ginn@uq.edu.au](mailto:g.ginn@uq.edu.au)) or Adam Bowles ([a.bowles1@uq.edu.au](mailto:a.bowles1@uq.edu.au)).

You can also contact Jess White, the Project Co-ordinator (working one day per week), at [garel@uq.edu.au](mailto:garel@uq.edu.au).

### **Public talks and events**

Our postponed showcase event (originally planned for August 2021) has now been moved ahead to March 2022. The details are being finalised, but it is likely to be on 31 March at the State Library of Queensland.

Please watch this space and your inbox for further confirmation and invitations for this catered event. It will be an evening session, presenting initial findings on a number of major religious sites to be featured in the online Queensland Atlas of Religion and unveiling the new website design. As a catered event, it will be open to the public and held at the State Library of Queensland (further information to be provided in early 2022).

### **Two (Very Welcome) Arrivals**

We are delighted to finally welcome our two overseas-based postgraduate researchers, who are scheduled to touch down in Australia (all things working out as they should ... touch wood) in December 2021-January 2022.

Both **Zerrin Afza** and **Jerrold Cuperus** have endured frustrating delays to their research plans as a result of the pandemic. Unable to travel and often in lockdown, they have had to commence work on their doctoral projects while enrolled remotely. For this reason alone, it will be wonderful to finally welcome them to Australia and into the QAR research community face-to-face, now that both have been awarded travel exemptions to commence their PhD studies at UQ.

Zerrin (from Bangladesh) will be examining aspects of Islamic community life and migration in Queensland, while Jerrold (from The Netherlands) will work on aspects of

‘charismatic Christianity’ and the mega-church phenomenon. These are vital subjects for the QAR project, which these talented young researchers will be tackling in earnest from the start of 2022.

Their arrival will ensure that we kick off next year with a bang, and a great sense of relief for all concerned! A special mention should also be made of their supervisors, **Ryan Williams** and **Tom Aechtner**, and the enormous work invested in overcoming these challenges.

## UQ Summer Scholar

In December **Tahlia Watts** commenced with us as a UQ ‘Summer Scholar.’ This is a scheme that encourages talented undergraduate students to work with academic staff on research projects over the summer.



Tahlia is a Studies in Religion student going into her second year at UQ. She is especially interested in peace studies and conflict resolution, with a focus on social cohesion. Among other things in 2022 she will be studying RELN2301 Buddhism: from India to the World with none other than Adam Bowles!

Before then, though, Tahlia will be spending eight weeks with the QAR team in December and January 2021-2022. She will be visiting sites and communities in Brisbane to look at their archives and other collections, meeting relevant people and developing partnerships.

## UQ Ethics Approval

One of the QAR’s main aims is to document the lived experience of Queenslanders, in relation to their religion, their places of worship, and their stories.

Thus, one of our big tasks this year has been to apply for, and receive, ethical clearance to do what is termed ‘human research’. Although

essential for any researcher who plans to work with people, this process can be time consuming. This year the QAR team was successful in pulling together an application that will ensure ethical and well conducted research for both the project and participants – our approved Ethics ID number is 2021/HE001693.

As a result, fieldwork is underway (see below), and we also have a suite of approved documents for researchers to use in conducting field visits and oral history interviews. These include a ‘Participant Information Sheet’, a consent form and deposit paperwork for our industry partner the State Library of Queensland.

If you’d like to find out more, you can contact the UQ Ethics Coordinator directly on +617 3365 3924, or email: [humanethics@research.uq.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@research.uq.edu.au).

## Fieldwork 1: Getting into the research ‘on the ground’

One of the QAR doctoral researchers, **Prabuddha Mukherjee**, reports on her early forays into the world of field interviews:

Thanks to the UQ Ethics Approval (see above), I am now able to ease into fieldwork, slowly and steadily, by establishing contact with religious organisations and collecting data through observations, survey, and interviews. As a result, this summer will be exciting and action-packed! Getting into the field is exhausting.

However, the joy and excitement I experience while visiting the places and networking with the communities that welcome me with open arms is so far beyond my expectations.

Establishing a connection and trying to let organisations and individuals develop trust in me is a difficult and time-consuming process. For the past few months, through long hours of telephone chats, on-site meetings, and a slew of emails, I’ve been able to seek permission to enter the premises of some of

the institutions. There are still a few approvals pending.



The organisations I have visited have all been welcoming and helpful. After a few visits to the Gayatri Mandir in Boondall (*see above*), the Swaminarayana Temple in Kingston, the Singh Sabha Gurudwara in Taigum, and the Syro-Malabar Church in Hillcrest, my preliminary reflection is that religious organisations all aim to establish a space for community belonging.

These sites, and their presence in Brisbane, clearly have had a significant impact on individuals' lives. I'm interested in their role as the foci of community engagement, a place that helps bind immigrants to their roots.

*Mrs Prabuddha Mukherjee*

HDR Student – QAR Project, UQ School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry

## Affiliated researchers

In recent months the QAR project has also expanded with the addition of contributing researchers. Among others introduced in previous Updates, we are excited to have met and now be working with:

**Ray Kerkhove** is a well-known Brisbane professional historian and ethno-historian. He is very well-known for a range of history and culture initiatives, including heritage assessments, place-based research and community consultation, primarily for Southeast Queensland but also further afield.

He has a primary interest in reconstructing contact-period Aboriginal landscapes and lifestyles, and has worked for a wide range of Indigenous groups, councils, universities and government bodies. Among many projects his research was central to the QUT 'Campus to Country' Positioning Strategy (2020), which won the 2021 National Commendation for Urban Design.

Between 2007 and 2011, Ray was Project Manager and co-founder of Interactive Community Planning Australia – a non-for-profit organisation to develop Indigenous cultural and historical initiatives across Queensland and nationally. Working closely with Aboriginal communities, ICP completed over 30 projects including regional events, book publishing, youth events, exhibitions, film documentaries, oral histories, cultural and language revival projects.



His original doctoral research, however, was in the field of Studies in Religion, and he is committed to a multi-faith approach to mapping religious history, highlighting the history and achievements of smaller and more obscure forms of spirituality.

**Nic Desjardins** is a UQ History graduate, about to commence his Honours year in 2022. Building on his undergraduate research project this year, Nic's 20,000 word thesis will explore and document the little-understood history of Spiritualism in Queensland.

Nic has sent in some initial thoughts on his thesis project:

"150 years ago, Spiritualism was a topic of singular fascination throughout the English-speaking world, and its ideas surrounding spirits and clairvoyance set the stage for many of the New Age movements popular today. The aim of my thesis is to document how the arrival of this nebulous, syncretic folk-religion



was felt here in Queensland, and how it has evolved and adapted in the years since. Perhaps because histories of esoteric traditions have only recently begun to attract scholarly interest, there has been surprisingly little written on Spiritualism in Australia, least of all on Queensland. Yet my research so far has found its story to be far from uneventful.

The National Library's Trove archives, travel diaries of Spiritualist preachers, and visits to our local Brisbane



Spiritual Church (see above) have already begun to reveal a history of fiery battles in the press, tense theological debates, séances held by esteemed Brisbane politicians, visits by international celebrities on preaching tours, and wild theatrical spirit-summoning by controversial 'stage mediums'. I am excited for the opportunity the Atlas gives me to shed light on this fascinating side of Queensland's religious landscape!"

We will put the spotlight on other affiliated researchers in next year's Updates.

## Fieldwork 2: Collaborations on Mithaka Country



*Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation General Manager Josh Gorringe speaks to the QAR project near Windorah, September 2021*

In September this year, QAR researchers were fortunate to travel to western Queensland to

meet with the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation and describe the project to their Annual General Meeting at Windorah. Mithaka country covers a large part of Queensland's Channel Country, between Bedourie and Windorah, and west to just before Birdsville. It is an area of red sandhills, grassy plains and stony gibber flats – a truly awesome and inspiring landscape. Extensive cultural sites, stone arrangements and evidence of long-standing Aboriginal land use are primary features of this iconic area of Queensland.

As holders of Native Title rights for this area, the Mithaka are keen to share their sense of the importance of country and their own connections. Through a letter of support for the QAR, the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation and its representatives are willing to contribute through cultural and historical analysis and video recordings for the completed Atlas.



*Richard Martin and Adam Bowles coming to grips with outback Queensland, September 2021. A long way from St Lucia!*

As a pilot case study for our project, this partnership is a very positive step and sets the scene for other similar collaborations elsewhere in Queensland.

## Website design underway

Jonathan Hadwen and Alvin Sebastian, two experienced programmers from the UQ Research Computing Centre, have been assisting the QAR project team in developing a brief for digital design services. The final QAR site (which will be hosted at [www.qarel.com.au](http://www.qarel.com.au)) will be developed in WordPress, using external expertise in thematic design and website architecture.

The UQ procurement process has resulted in the engagement of an external provide, ICEMEDIA, led by Michael Bartlett with a team of dedicated specialists who will develop designs and concepts for the website architecture. We're looking forward to working with ICEMEDIA over the summer with a public interface for our site ready to go by March-April 2022.

## Fieldwork 3: Avatar's Abode

**Geoff Ginn** reports on two fascinating days in early December 2021 at a unique spiritual retreat and community at Kiels Mountain, near Woombye on the Sunshine Coast.

"Avatar's Abode, a calming and peaceful place, was established in the 1950s by the Australian followers of the Indian spiritual guide and Avatar Meher Baba, who at that time was actively spreading his message to western societies such as Australia, Europe and the US. Meher Baba himself stayed here in 1958, and it is maintained today as a pilgrimage site and as a living evocation of his teachings.

A lovely warm welcome was extended to me and to Ray Kerkhove, who very kindly organised a number of introductions. Along the way the first interviews were conducted with two long-term residents there, Bill Le Page and Bernard Bruford. These are among the first to be formally conducted for the State Library collection as part of our QAR project.

After two days of generous hospitality, from Diana Le Page and everyone else we met, Ray and I drove back to Brisbane on Friday night, talking all the way (both of us are known for

that...). There really was a lot to talk about, as it had been a truly inspiring visit. We can only hope that all our QAR fieldwork will be as rewarding as this!"



*Bill and Diana Le Page, Avatar's Abode, December 2021*

## Find us on Instagram

Our social media presence is a work in progress, as we source images and places of religious significance, stories and associations throughout Queensland. Search for qarel uq, or 'Queensland Atlas of Religion'.



## Interested? Finding out more

For further information about the QAR project, to get involved or to make suggestions, please email: Geoff Ginn ([g.ginn@uq.edu.au](mailto:g.ginn@uq.edu.au)) or Adam Bowles ([a.bowles@uq.edu.au](mailto:a.bowles@uq.edu.au)).

Jess White, the QAR project administrator, can be contacted at: [qarel@uq.edu.au](mailto:qarel@uq.edu.au).

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