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**Speech given at the launch of *What Christians Believe*  
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Thank you all very much for being here today. It is a great joy to see you all here.

I'd like to thank Professor Will Christie for hosting the launch at the ANU. I am particularly pleased that this launch can take place at the ANU's Humanities Research Centre. I think religion is an integral part of the humanities, and I am grateful that the Humanities Research Centre recognises this through events such as the evening on the King James' Bible, and this launch. Symbols like the Return of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are obviously integral to European art, literature, thought, and the humanities in a broad sense of the word. So I think it is fitting that this launch should be hosted here, and I am grateful.

Next, I want to thank my two launchers, Professor Howard Morphy and Reverend Professor Anthony Kelly, who represent my two worlds: the secular world of the university and the Christian world of the church and of faith. As our friend Carsten Levisen – a Danish linguist working in Melanesia – said to me recently: "I have never met an atheist in Melanesia, and I have never met a Christian at a Danish university". Well, Australia is not Denmark – Denmark is said to be the most secular country in the world. Still, an Australian university like the ANU is, by and large, a secular world.

My two launchers also represent two different disciplines – anthropology and theology – both different from my own home discipline of linguistics. And yet I see a deep connection between my two launchers. This connection lies in their openness to dialogue, and also in what Father Tony in his book *The Resurrection Effect* calls "transcultural openness" and "transcultural consciousness". Naturally, these ideals are very important to Howard as a cultural anthropologist, and he has demonstrated them compellingly in his work in general, and his work on Australian Aboriginal art in particular. But if you read Father Tony's books such as *The Resurrection Effect* and *God is Love: The Heart of Christian Faith*, you will see that transcultural openness and transcultural consciousness are also central to his work, and his vision.

I must say that these ideals are also at the heart of my own work, and that of my closest colleagues. In our semantic work Cliff Goddard and I, and the whole NSM community, try to build bridges between people of different languages and cultures through shared human concepts, or what Carsten Levisen calls "linguistic translatables". This book is part of this endeavour. At the same time, it tries to build bridges in understanding between Christians and non-Christians – bridges based on shared human concepts and on a shared desire to search for truth and goodness. So, in this book I have tried my best to explain what Christians believe to non-Christians, as well as to myself and fellow-Christians.

In addition to the launchers, I would like to thank the people from my seminar on Christianity and translation who have helped me to write "The Story of God and People", which is at the heart of this book, and to whom the book is dedicated. As I say in the Acknowledgments, "The Story of God and People" is the fruit of sustained, persistent search for the truth by a group of deeply engaged participants of a weekly seminar that I conducted here at the ANU over three years. I was truly blessed to have this opportunity for long-term

dialogical interaction, and I am deeply grateful to all the participants. Several of them are here today: Helen Bromhead, Debbie Hill, Denis Fisher, Peter Hill, Irena Svilans-Dennis, Paul Jordan, Mary Besemeres. I'd like to note the ecumenical character of this seminar, which brings together Protestants as well as Catholics, and which also includes non-believers.

By the way, this seminar continues. If you are interested, you can always join us on Thursday at 1pm, in Baldessin Building (level 2, linguistics library).

Apart from expressing my gratitude to a number of people, I would also like to take this opportunity to say something very briefly about three things which mean a lot to me.

1. The first is that I think it is important to understand other people, those near us, and also those distant from us, whether in space, time, language or culture. And it is not easy to understand other people, especially if they are distant from us.

I'd like to illustrate this with something that an old Aboriginal man once said to the Australian anthropologist W.H. Stanner: "White man got no dreaming". I have often thought about these words. I'd like to fully understand what this man meant.

On one level, it seems to me that I do understand; and I'd like to respond: I think that Christians do have a dreaming. But on another level, this old man was clearly referring to the Aboriginal concept expressed in words like "Jukurrpa" in Warlpiri, or "Altyerre" in Arrernte.

Stanner tried to explain this concept by speaking of "a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, which is also, in a sense, still part of the present". But for all my admiration for Stanner, this is, it seems to me, a somewhat Eurocentric understanding. This explanation can be very helpful for English speakers, but it relies on concepts which come from English, such as "sacred" and "heroic", not from Australian Aboriginal languages.

As colleagues and I believe, we can achieve better understanding if in our explanations we rely on concepts which are shared by all languages, and all speakers – concepts like "good" and "bad", "word" and "true", "before" and "after". My colleague Cliff Goddard and I have tried to provide such an explanation of the Warlpiri concept of "jukurrpa" ("dreaming") in an article which was published in *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (in 2015).

In the book that is being launched here today, I have tried to provide an analogous explanation of the "Christian dreaming". This is what "The Story of God and People" tries to achieve. No doubt, it is not perfect, but I think it is easier to understand than most other books on either theology or comparative religion. And it is far more cross-translatable into other languages.

2. The second point that I want to make is that I believe in the essential unity of humankind. This belief is not very fashionable these days in academia and in fact it is often contested, with great emphasis being placed on "diversity" and some scorn expressed for putative human universals. Yet without human universals we couldn't have any global ethics, any hope for a global – planetary – conversation about what is good and what is bad. We wouldn't be able to say that it is bad if people want to kill other people, or that it is bad if people want to do very bad things to other people. We can say such things only because – as cross-linguistic investigations show – all languages have words for GOOD and BAD, WANT, DO and PEOPLE.

As Father Tony puts it in his recent article “The Risen Christ and inter-faith dialogue”, “the dialogical attitude (...) envisages unity in difference, rather than a homogenized sameness”. I think that as linguists and anthropologists we should adopt the same attitude to human languages and cultures, and to look in them for “unity in difference” rather than either “homogenised sameness” (a la Chomsky) or boundless diversity, without even shared concepts like GOOD and BAD, KNOW and THINK.

As St Paul said to the Greeks in his speech in Athens two thousand years ago, “God hath made of one blood all nations of men (...) to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26, King James Version). “One blood” means here also what anthropologist Franz Boas called later “the psychic unity of mankind”. This unity of humankind is expressed also in the shared human words like GOOD and BAD, BEFORE and AFTER, TRUE, WORDS, and PEOPLE.

3. The third, and last, point that I want to make is about Jesus. Jesus’ “dreaming” was universal: he wanted it to reach all people, so it was meant to be accessible to all people. At the same time, it was very much embedded within one particular culture. So there is, seemingly, a paradox here: We can only understand Jesus’ teaching in the context of that particular culture, but at the same time, we know that he wanted his teaching to be conveyed also to people from other cultures, as he put it, “to the ends of the earth”.

Furthermore, as twenty-first century speakers of English we are also embedded in a particular culture, which draws, among other things, on Christian concepts, such as “forgiveness”, and Christian images, such as “turn the other cheek” and “the good Samaritan”. These words and images are shared not only by speakers of English, but also by speakers of a great many other languages, including my native Polish. To explain what Christians believe to people from non-Christian backgrounds we need to rethink these concepts and these images with the help of shared human concepts; and also, without relying on norms of interpretation specific to our own culture.

For those who are not interested in Christianity as such, this project of re-thinking Christianity from a universal point of view can work as a laboratory for exploring the scope of possible human understanding.

The diversity of human languages and cultures is phenomenal, but it is not boundless: I believe that with a good methodology, we can better understand other people’s “dreamings” and make our own “dreaming” more intelligible to others. I hope that this book is a step in that direction. Thank you all very much for welcoming this book by coming here today. I thank my family: my husband John, who is here today, and our daughters Mary and Clare, who are also both here. I thank my parish priest, Father Paul Nulley, also present here. I am very grateful to you all; and, needless to say, to God, who I think is also here today.