



Breaking Disciplinary Walls in the Examination of Anzac as Religion

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Abstract

Anzac was first proposed as Australia’s civil religion in the 1960s. Since then, comparisons with conventional religion—the presence of ritual, music, and movement; the deification of symbolic figures; and the centrality of sacrifice—have continued to be observed within the humanities; these have relied primarily on observable parallels with Christian tradition. Though historians and social sciences scholars have drawn a comprehensive picture of the “who,” “what,” and “when,” traditional disciplinary silos must be overcome to compellingly address the “how” and “why.” Theoretical and empirical contributions from the scientific study of sacred values and religiosity, spanning fields of cognitive science, cultural and cognitive anthropology, and psychology, among others, can explain the pervasive cultural influence and endurance of the Anzac tradition. This paper provides an integrative analysis of the parallels between Anzac and religion. It draws on the key cognitive, environmental, and social mechanisms from the frontier of religiosity and sacred value research—minimally counterintuitive narrative structure, credibility enhancing displays (CREDS), priming, rituals and group cohesion, and the backfire effect—to provide a science-based foundation for arguments for Anzac’s religiosity.

Keywords Anzac · Australia · Civil religion · Supernatural belief · Secular belief · Study of religiosity

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In a collection of critical essays, *What's Wrong with Anzac?*, Australian historian Mark McKenna (2010) remarks that Anzac Day (25 April) is 'holier than 25 December in the Australian calendar' (p. 112).¹ "Before Anzac," McKenna continues, "we bow down, we close ranks and we remain silent" (p. 133). He is not the first to write about the pious reverence that surrounds Australia's most popular secular tradition; it was in the jubilee year of the first Anzac Day that Ken Inglis (1965) observed clear parallels between organised religion and Anzac. Recently, there has been a call to "place the Anzac myth ... within, rather than outside, the field of religion" (Hartney 2015, p. 110). However, the tools needed to accomplish this bridge—namely, the psychological metalanguage—have been missing from the conversation. Academic disciplines working in isolation will be unable to comprehensively account for this modern-day Australian piety.

The discipline of history has mapped the genesis, form, and function of Anzac as a sacred force in Australia; anthropology, sociology, and religious studies have also made important contributions, especially in revealing how Anzac is performed publicly in a religious fashion. There is, however, insufficient interplay between science and humanities disciplines on the Anzac topic. This needs rectifying since religious belief is composed of complex cognitive and psychological processes that synthesise into larger sociocultural assemblages (Taves 2015). This paper therefore expands Anzac scholarship through integrating it into the context of the wider scientific literature regarding religiosity. Empirical and theoretical contributions from the study of religiosity can illuminate the underlying social and cognitive processes that give rise to devotion.

We begin by providing an overview of Anzac in Australia. We then offer a summary of existing comparisons between Anzac and religiosity drawn primarily by historians and based largely on the broad similarities observable between religious traditions and Anzac commemoration. Finally, in an integrative analysis of the parallels, we use the key social, cognitive, and environmental mechanisms from the rapidly progressing literature on religiosity and sacred values—minimally counterintuitive narrative structure, credibility enhancing displays, priming, rituals and group cohesion, and the backfire effect—to provide explanatory power and a scientific basis for existing claims. We hope this framework enriches the discussion of Anzac's religious dimensions.

The Development of the Anzac Tradition

The military and sociocultural history of Anzac dates to the First World War. The term referred to the combined Australian and New Zealand force that landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 as part of the British Empire's contribution to the Allied Powers' invasion of the Ottoman Empire. The campaign was a failure, and the Allied forces withdrew in defeat in December that year. From a Eurocentric viewpoint, the Gallipoli campaign was a "sideshow" to fighting in Western Europe. Yet, as established by recent global histories of the First World War that decentre European perspectives on the conflict, the theatres of battle in the Middle East were

¹ Anzac is a styling of Australian and New Zealand Army Corps and is used when referring to its sociocultural uses; when referencing the corps itself, it is written ANZAC.

significant for the main participant nations and empires (Johnson and Kitchen 2019). Narratives of the Ottoman victory at Çanakkale (the Turkish name for the site of the Gallipoli campaign) have reaffirmed versions of national identity in Turkey—either patriotic, anti imperialist, or religious (Öztañ 2015). Gallipoli was also a watershed in Australia’s national consciousness, with Australians embracing as a truism the idea that a nation “must be blooded” (Schultz 2015). Consequently, despite Australia becoming a nation in 1901, Gallipoli is popularly considered the “birthplace” of Australian nationhood. The blooding of the Anzacs is popularly considered to have demonstrated to the world the characteristics and values that supposedly make Anglo-Australians a distinct people, including mateship and resilience (Crotty 2009). This collection of traits is conveniently packaged up as “the Anzac spirit” or Anzac legend.

The process that infused Anzac with Australian identity and values began shortly after the landings in April 1915. Australian and British war correspondents provided laudatory reports about the conduct of the Australian troops. This reportage simultaneously satisfied the government’s thirst for propaganda and the hunger of the public for news from the front. Soon, mounting casualties and the search for a way for communities to mourn their lost loved ones—the dead were buried overseas—led to the creation of memorials and organisations to honour the fallen. Officially sanctioned histories and narratives sought to elevate an idealised and purposeful view of wartime sacrifice as compensation for the suffering the nation endured (Seal 2015). Regulations around the use of the word Anzac came into force in the early 1920s, reinforcing its solemnity. This legislation also protected the sacredness of Anzac Day (Hawkins 2018), which became the focal point for public mourning and the epicentre of commemoration. While the day was being observed at home and abroad during the war, the decades that followed saw it elevated to a public holiday and the stature of *de facto* national day (Holbrook 2014). Such was Anzac’s power; it was drawn upon as a symbol of national solidarity and grim-faced resolve during the Second World War (Massam and Smith 1998; McKenna 2010).

In the modern era, Anzac has lost its British imperial vestiges, instead becoming a template for a distinctly Australian identity. While the popularity of Anzac Day flagged in the 1960s amidst antiwar protests and the declining relevance of the British Empire to Australia’s foreign and economic policies, a surge was experienced in the 1980s and 1990s as Australians searched for a new focal point for their national image (McKenna 2010). Renewed interest was fuelled in part by filmmakers and writers who recast the imperial history of Gallipoli as an exclusively national story. Peter Weir’s 1981 film, *Gallipoli*, typifies this revisionism: the multi-national coalition that made the 1915 campaign possible is shunted to accommodate an Australian-centric story composed of Anzac legend motifs (Reynaud 2012). As the ranks of ex-servicemen also thinned—replaced by younger generations marching with or in place of their forebears on Anzac Day—old political divisions faded, replaced by a largely uncontested sentimentalism (McKenna 2010). A wave of sympathy for the plight of war veterans following the Vietnam War and growing awareness of PTSD added to the increasingly maudlin tone (Twomey 2013).

Anzac’s renewed sheen was polished by politicians eager to exploit an Anzac-inspired nationalism. Seeking a unifying narrative during a series of nation-wide transformations—specifically, the dismantling of many of the legislative, symbolic and foreign policy connections to Great Britain, as well as the removal of economic protections and the resultant liberalisation of the economy—prime ministers Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, and John Howard all evoked Anzac and Australian mateship, albeit in different ways (Dyrenfurth 2007;

Holbrook 2014; McKenna 2010). Hawke, at the 75th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, spoke profoundly of the power of Anzac to be revived: “Its meaning can endure only as long as each new generation of Australians finds the will to reinterpret it to breathe, as it were, new life into the old story” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 1990, p. 2). Burgeoning interest in family heritage—thanks to the preponderance of online history repositories and research tools—has helped breathe this new life into Anzac (Inglis 2008). The family members of military servicepersons stake unique claim to the Anzac phenomenon (Brown 2015), and the recent boom in genealogical investigation has multiplied personal identification with the First World War (Clark 2016). Anzac is upheld by these individual acts, for family historians usually frame their family’s past within the dominant national narrative (Sleeter 2016).

The monolithic legend, with its emphasis on homosociality, whiteness, and hegemonic masculinity, elides more complex readings of Australia’s First World War experience (Stockings 2012). Cross-cultural encounters, home front tensions, and Aboriginal wartime service are just some of the topics that struggle for air (Ariotti and Bennett 2017). Indeed, historicity faces manifold challenges in modern Australia. The effusions of commercial media and the explosion of non-academic books on battlefield topics (Macleod 2007); extraordinary government spending (more than half-a-billion dollars) to advance war memorialisation and commemoration during the centenary of the Great War 2014–2018 (Stephens 2019); often uncritical school curriculum materials (Lake 2010); and “pilgrimages” to dawn services and significant Anzac sites (Stephens 2014) have collided to create “sacred ground” which is difficult for the historian to stand upon and speak freely (Kilmister et al. 2017). Changing conceptions of war as trauma and veterans as traumatised in the 1980s also sideline historians. Survivors of war trauma have become “the authentic conduit to that [traumatic] past”; in other words, war can only be understood by those who were there (Twomey 2013, p. 107).

The sidelining of academic history in mainstream discourse has likely contributed to Australians’ general ignorance of First World War history and critiques of Anzac. While in the past two decades, especially historical scholarship has been disseminated through a range of publicly accessible mediums including small screen documentaries (Bennett 2014, 2017), evidence of impact is non-existent. A 2011 report commissioned by the Australian government found “there is a perception that there is as much information as anyone could want about Gallipoli already available – but despite this actual knowledge is poor” (National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary 2011, p. 75). An illustration of this phenomenon is the dominant influence of vivid literary representations, such as the poetry of Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), on popular conceptions of the First World War in the Anglosphere. This literature supersedes neutral or less thrilling depictions that represent with greater accuracy the typical involvement of the majority (Loughran 2012; Todman 2005). The striking power of the most extreme and memorable portrayals of events and emotions—“mud, blood, and horror”—are more influential to the conception of the narrative than academic history.

Rather than dying with the First World War generation, the modern uses and permutations of the Anzac tradition have reaffirmed it as a common language of the nation. Politicians reach for the language of Anzac to honour Australian soldiers killed in recent overseas conflicts (Brown 2014). Its infusion with Australian culture has led to the coining of the term “creeping Anzacism” (Page 2010, p. 276), while the obsession with commemoration—and the tremendous levels of public spending and commercialism seen in the last few years—has been termed

“Anzackery” (Daley 2013). Only a minority of the Australian public, comprised largely of marginalised individuals, adhere to an “anti-Anzac” narrative (Fallon 2017); those brave enough to raise their head above the parapet must endure public scorn (Cochrane 2015; Damousi 2010; Dwyer 2015). As Ball (2005) suggests, “the sanctity [of] spilt blood generally stifles dissent” (p. 164). Anzac’s transmogrification over the decades has been accompanied by religious behaviours and forms.

Existing Comparisons Between Anzac and Religion in History and the Humanities

Anzac is a civil (or civic) religion; a secular belief that promotes national solidarity, with themes and rituals taken from national history and the polity. One of the earliest theorists of the civil religion concept was Émile Durkheim, who concluded that society and religion are coterminous—nonsectarian faith will emerge organically from a collective group of people (Coleman 1970; Wallace 1977). Subsequent sociological scholarship has enriched our understanding, notably finding that social movements and political organisations legitimise themselves through harnessing and interpreting mainstream symbols and culture (Demerath and Williams 1985). The above outline of Anzac’s origins and evolutions reveals how Anzac conforms to a civil religion: it is a cohesive force rooted in a historical event; it enshrines certain national and individual values and is manipulated by politicians and interest groups. However, as Durkheim detected, ongoing affirmation of sacredness and secular religiosity require regular ceremonies and ritual processes that “do not differ from regular religious ceremonies” (Durkheim 1915, p. 427). The ceremonial aspects of Anzac borrowed from organised religion—especially Christianity—demand unpacking in this section.

A rich historiography has examined similarities between the culture of Anzac and Abrahamic religion. Australia’s most famous historian Manning Clark (1987) wrote of the “mystique” that shrouded Anzac and Australia in the post-war years, noting that “Australia was acquiring a secular religion” (p. 21). The late Inglis (2008), in his tome on war memorials and their significance, wrote “[t]he cult of Anzac warrants the name civil religion” (p. 445). Billings (2017) follows in Inglis’ train, also positioning Anzac as the nation’s dominant religious form: it fills the hole left by the decline of religion in modern Australia. Anzac, according to Billings, is “displaced Christianity”. Other scholars have contended that emphasising secularity downplays both the Christian-derived initiation of Anzac Day (Moses 2015; Wetherell 2018) and the fact that Australians typically experience Anzac emotionally, not rationally (Hartney 2015). In all, the broad consensus among scholars is that Anzac commemoration constitutes a religion (Chavura et al. 2019). There are three elements of this commemoration that especially parallel conventional religious belief: the quasi-worship of suffering and sacrifice, deification of long-deceased young men, and the solemnity of ritualised commemoration.

Suffering and Sacrifice

Recognition of sacrifice is central to the form and substance of Anzac culture and practice. Robert Bellah (1967) identified that the themes of suffering, sacrifice and rebirth—memorialised in national cemeteries and shrines dedicated to American wartime dead and recited in presidential speeches—are hallowed features of the American civil religion. Bellah’s

thesis is applicable beyond the USA (Crouter 1990; Fallon 2017); his observations about civil religious archetypes are detectable in the public expressions of Anzac. For instance, the diggers' emergence from the trenches at Gallipoli, and their spilt blood, is linked to ancient Greek autochthonic myths where the earth disgorges heroes and "births" the nation (Lake 1992). Linking Gallipoli and Anzac to classical traditions of history is also seen in the design of shrines and memorials that dot the Australian landscape. Garton (1998) argues that these memorials demonstrate "a complex tension between Christian and Classical symbolism" (p. 91). It is perhaps unsurprising that the predominantly young Australians travelling to overseas battlefield pilgrimage sites like the Lone Pine memorial have been described as searching for a "spiritual experience" (Scates 2006).

Blood, sacrifice, and rebirth are tenets of both Anzac and Christianity. Billings (2017) sees Christianity's focus on the sacrifice of Christ as comparable with Anzac's iconography of sacrifice and public expressions that soldiers' deaths would "not be in vein." Elsewhere, it has been suggested that the term Anzac spirit echoes the "Holy Spirit," demanding Australians "to live out the values that dead soldiers are deemed to have embodied *en masse*" (Mitchell 2015). The Christian elements of Anzac Day were by design. The liturgy of the solemn day was laid down by a committee led by the Canon David John Garland (1864–1939) in 1916 (Moses and Davis 2013). Moses (2016) argues that Garland's liturgical vision was a "reconciliatory and inclusive form of Anglo-Catholicism" that managed to overcome historic sensitivities and unite the community (pp. 64–65). Here, we find that Anzac is a civil religion because its symbolic forms and acts are general enough to gain wide acceptance (Coleman 1970).

Deification

An important aspect of the Anzac civil religion is the veneration of war veterans, dead and living, as well as their purported deeds and values. The most famous example of this deification is that of John Simpson Kirkpatrick (1892–1915). An English-born member of the Australian Imperial Force, he served in the 3rd Field Ambulance at Gallipoli. Simpson ferried wounded soldiers from the frontlines using a donkey; he died 3 weeks after the landing at Anzac Cove. As Cochrane (1992) argues, Simpson's bravery and his story were utilised for propaganda purposes. Perhaps the most iconic images of Australia's First World War are the portraits and statuary that depict Simpson and his donkey with grateful wounded. These depictions are laden with Biblical motifs, including Joseph and Mary (Meacham 2015). Cochrane (1992) comments "[b]oth Christians and secular humanists could see their reflection in his image" (p. 2). Simpson's prolific status in the Anzac canon means he, perhaps more than any other ANZAC, carries the weight of national values. In 2005, his image provided the background to the nationally endorsed education poster expounding nine Australian values (Green and Leung 2005). Yet, the enduring function of the Simpson and his donkey parable has very little basis; a 2013 federal government inquiry found only a tenuous link between tales of his legendary heroism and historical reality (Baker 2013).

Ritualised Commemoration

The religious overtones of dawn services and other Anzac commemorative occasions are well established. Whether located in civic, military, or religious settings, commemorative services, with their "combination of symbols, sounds, silences, space, time, acts and rhetoric" derived from military and religious traditions, are highly ritualised events (Seal 2011, p. 52). Dawn

services especially attain tremendous emotional affect through contrasting the stillness, silence, and darkness of the early morning with readings of sacred texts such as Robert Binyon's "For the Fallen" and bursts of sombre, funeral procession-like music (Sumartojo 2016). The broad pattern of the Anzac Day ceremony is powerfully described by Moses (2016):

citizens assemble usually around a memorial plinth or monument, sitting or standing, gathered in anticipation of the unfolding ceremony in reflective reverence watching the catafalque party approach. Indeed, the kettle drum beat, the catafalque party's slow and strictly measured step, the sudden halt once each soldier has reached his or her position, the reversal of weapons and the ritual swing of arms to place both hands on the butt of the side arm followed by the solemn bowing of the soldiers' head immediately presage what is a carefully considered liturgy. The assembled citizens now form what is essentially a congregation attending an intentionally awe-inspiring service of secular or civil religion (p. 60).

Other prominent features of services include wreath laying, the playing of "The Last Post" on bugle, and a 1 or 2-min silence (Seal 2011).

Ritual is not confined to 1 day a year. Around the country, Returned Services League clubs (popularly RSLs) commit patrons to daily 1-min silences; moments that have been described as suspending participants in "supreme bathos" (Ball 2005). Another everyday ritual is the baking and consumption of Anzac biscuits. Mainly consisting of rolled oats, flour, butter, sugar, baking soda, and golden syrup, the function of these biscuits during the First World War is disputed (Cedro 2019), but their simplicity and popularity ensure they are now baked and sold year-round. Supski (2006) argues this culinary tradition fits religious forms. Anzac biscuits are a secular "communion wafer": "through eating the biscuits, one 'belongs' in and to the Australian nation" (p. 58).

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the "How" and "Why"

Thus far, parallels drawn between Anzac and religiosity have relied on shared diction, common influences, and the characteristics of rituals, similarities which are clear to an observer, tangible in nature, and relatively superficial. Drawn primarily from the observations and experiences of Western scholars, these comparisons are typically based in Christian tradition. We propose that the mutuality between Anzac and religiosity runs deeper than mimicry, encompassing the exposition of belief transmission and persistence increasingly salient in a variety of psychological, cognitive, and anthropological fields. That is, the social, cultural, cognitive and environmental mechanisms evidenced to underlie supernatural belief, within and across the 4000 or so religions existing in the world at any one time, may hold the capacity for ideological understanding beyond that of the supernatural (including civil religions). Devotion to, and deification of, prominent historical figures (including war veterans) are but one example which further embodies the sentiment. Therefore, the divine nature of the Anzac myth may lend itself to be evaluated via the same combination of mechanisms thought to be responsible for adherence to religiosity.

Despite its widespread use, the definition of "religion" is unresolved. Hundreds of definitions are used throughout the literature. Many scholars operationalise religion as a composition of measurable components, such as participation in ritual and belief in supernatural agents, superseding the need for a descriptive definition (e.g. Alcorta and Sosis 2005; Atran and

Norenzayan 2004). In reducing this complex phenomenon to a set of core elements, it is clear that most of them are fulfilled also by other cultural institutions. The transmission and persistence of devotion to political figures, down to the generational transmission of devotion to sports teams, holds stark resemblance to that of supernatural agents such as gods (Sosis et al. 2012). The blurred boundaries of religion impose challenges. However, they also encourage further exploration of the phenomenon. The essential components of religion, and the key theoretical frameworks in which they exist, extend explanatory power regarding the nature of Anzac in Australia.

Minimally Counterintuitive Narratives and Narrative Elements

Some factors enhance the transmission and persistence of cultural narratives, myths, and folktales. Minimally counterintuitive (MCI) narrative templates produce memory advantages over time, relative to entirely intuitive or maximally counterintuitive templates. That is, an account is more likely to achieve cultural stability if it includes mostly intuitive concepts combined with a minority of counterintuitive ones (Norenzayan et al. 2006). A concept is considered to be counterintuitive if it violates our ontological assumptions about the world and/or its basic categories, such as objects, events, and agentic beings (Barrett 2000). A cognitive trade-off between memory and attention is considered to be responsible for the recall advantage of MCI narratives and narrative elements (Boyer 2000, 2001). An entirely intuitive concept is not especially memorable or demanding of attention. A highly counterintuitive concept demands attention, but places too much strain on short-term memory, making it difficult to remember. Minimal violations engage attention and memory, resulting in more successful transmission.

Our mental and cultural representations of the supernatural agents central to religious belief appear to us more familiar than unfamiliar. These agents are somewhat human in their appearance, or at least experience. It is hard to imagine a god who does not share our sensory capacities, for example. From this foundation, the Christian God, created in the image of man, may elicit physically implausible power over water or wine—a memorable and recallable element of an otherwise human experience. Banerjee et al. (2013) provide a clear example of the MCI template using the Christian example of a virgin mother. Though this concept differs somewhat from our ontological assumptions, demanding more cognitive attention for processing and encoding than the intuitive concept of a non-virgin mother, the violation is not so overwhelming that we cannot draw meaningful inference (as in the maximally counterintuitive example of “a virgin, liquid mother who never engages in goal-directed thought”). A memory recall advantage for MCI concepts, critical to the evolution of cultural narratives, has been demonstrated to persist even with long delays before recall (e.g. Barrett and Nyhof 2001; Norenzayan et al. 2006).

The deification of servicemen and women within the Anzac legend also fits the mould; human beings perceived as superhuman in their capacity for valour, good, and mateship (despite the violent realities of war). While the narrative is rooted in fact—real people fought and lost their lives—the deification of their own military personnel represents a desirable impulse for many Australians to which they cling with unyielding certainty. A memorable idea will hold a competitive edge over a less memorable idea when narratives are transmitted orally, having significant impacts on the success of transmission from generation to generation (Sperber 1996). Of course, the diffusion of academic knowledge in Australia, like much of the world, does not rely on oral traditions. Modern history is thoroughly documented. However, the history of the ANZACs and the popular tenets of the Anzac legend are often

distinct. The unique or “superhuman” qualities of Australian soldiery central to the legend are generally not accepted by academic scholarship. Therefore, the transmission of the legend must rely on alternative means. This helps to explain the capacity of literary representations of the First World War to overshadow the typical soldiering experiences documented by historians (Loughran 2012; Todman 2005)—the popular narrative is shaped by the most haunting illustrations of almost unimaginable trauma and tragedy. High memorability might be one reason that the Anzac legend continues to survive across generations.

Costly Signalling and Credibility Enhancing Displays

Social psychology has long considered the concept of modelling in learning and behavioural outcomes; we can learn by observing the actions of others (e.g. Bandura 1971, 1986). The acquisition of religion is no exception. Exposure to religious displays, most notably by parents and caregivers during childhood, is a reliable predictor of supernatural belief in adulthood (Lanman and Buhrmester 2017), and social learning may impact transmission beyond caregivers. Individuals are most likely to adopt the beliefs and practices most common to their in-groups (Henrich and Boyd 1998), with the greatest influential power expected from those with high levels of social prestige (Henrich and Gil-White 2001).

Recently, an additional factor has demonstrated significant impacts on belief transmission—verbal espousal of information is not sufficient. We are biased to accept information when combined with “displays by a model that would seem costly to the model if he or she held beliefs different from those he or she expresses verbally” (Henrich 2009, p. 244). A greater reliance on behaviour limits the potential for deception inherent in the verbal assurance of commitments and increases the observability of free riders. That is, cultural models must “walk the walk” to demonstrate the credibility of an idea. In the case of Anzac, thousands of people every year quite literally walk the walk, trekking Papua New Guinea’s Kokoda Track in the footsteps of soldiers during the Second World War, not to mention the pilgrimages to Gallipoli and other significant First World War sites on continental Europe (Scates 2013, 2006). Engaging in costly signalling and credibility enhancing displays (CREDs) relevant to one’s belief (including obeying moral guidelines, demonstrating attempts at contact with the supernatural, dedicating time and resources to devotion) will result in more successful transmission (Lanman 2012). Exposure to CREDs is a significant predictor of religiosity, even when controlling statistically for overall religious socialisation (Lanman and Buhrmester 2017).

Like belief in the existence of a particular god, the deification of historical figures does not occur in a vacuum. Regarding adherence to the Anzac legend, credibility enhancing displays from parents, peers, and influential figures are abundant. Monuments to the fallen are a common sight across the country. Anzac Day is a national holiday. Before dawn, young children wake with their parents to attend Anzac services, surrounded by masses of community members. Influential figures from across the country give moving tributes as the sun comes up. All school children take part in memorial services, and some don medals to march in parades. The family comes together to commemorate, as does the community, and the country at large. Though lacking in historic complexity, displays of credibility regarding the legend are substantial and far-reaching. Consistent with current evidence, we would expect adherence to the legend in its typical form to depend somewhat on exposure to these displays, particularly throughout childhood.

Priming and the “Sunday Effect”

Exposure effects are not limited to the actions of in-group members. A commonly cited rule of religious behaviour, “religion is more in the situation than in the person”, addresses the temporal manifestation of religiously guided behaviour (Norenzayan 2013). A social standard will affect the actions of an agent only with conscious activation of its relevance. Experimental evidence for the effect of perceived supernatural monitoring on prosociality demonstrates that behaviour of theists and atheists will be indistinguishable when measured in a secular environment (for example, a restaurant); theists will display stronger increases in prosociality when religious reminders are present (in a church, instead of a restaurant). Comparisons between American Christians and non-religious participants reveal that religious participants act consistently more generously than non-believers (Malhotra 2010) and even watch less pornography (Edelman 2009), but only on their day of worship. Averaging across the week, no differences are evident between groups. This is known as the Sunday effect.

Unless a believer is thinking religious thoughts at every moment, awareness of a watchful god, or his moral guidelines, (or the cognitive and emotional salience of the Anzac memory) is merely one of many competing imperatives that might influence an action at any given moment. Anzac monuments and statues are directly relatable to religious ones. Exposure to memorials and tributes, including monuments and cenotaphs in public spaces across the country, widespread media coverage, or the observation of a 1-min silence at every RSL club on any given night across the country, brings salience to the memory for a time. And just as we see, spikes in religious interest around key Christian holidays, for example (Kuriakose 2014), interest in Anzac spikes only once per year according to Google search trends (to coincide with Anzac Day; see Fig. 1). Even after reasonably accounting for the enquiries of the tens of thousands of people who attend Anzac events in towns and cities around Australia, the general trend remains. Clearly, context and environment play a significant role in keeping Anzac on our minds.

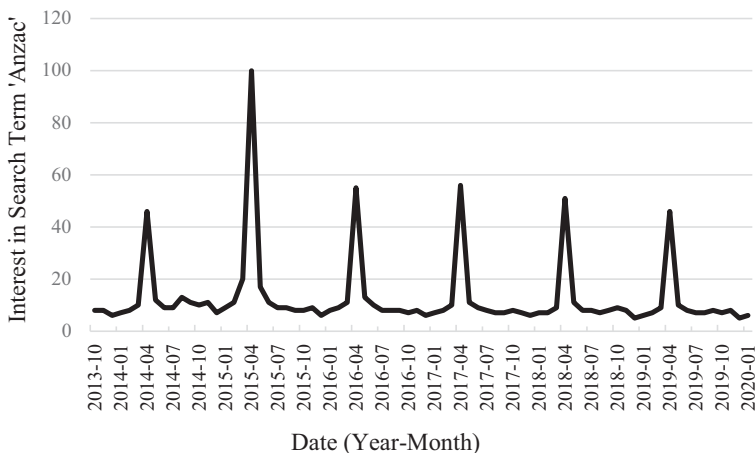


Fig. 1 Google Trends data for the search term “Anzac” in Australia for the last 6 years. Spikes evident each year only around April (the largest in 2015, 100 years since the campaign). Terms relating to people seeking information about Anzac Day events have been accounted for by removing the words “test”, “day”, and “march” from the results. Results are not case-sensitive (i.e. include term “ANZAC”). (Google Trends measures popularity of internet search terms. “Google Trends scores are based on the absolute search volume for a term, relative to the number of searches received by Google. The scores have no direct quantitative meaning.”)

Rituals—Group Cohesion, Cooperation, Kinship

Rather than a focus on expected outcomes, engagement with the ritual process itself is meaningful. Legare and Nielsen (2015) explain that a lack of physical causal mechanisms and observable outcomes of the ritual, underpinned by social proviso, constrains innovation by individuals. Therefore, rituals are ideally suited to cultural transmission over time. Many familiar traditions passed down through generations, including birthdays and funerals, in addition to personal prayer and group worship, fit the mould of rituals. Some examples of CREDs take the form of rituals (e.g. memorial services, parades, observation of silence). Like other forms of costly action, they require time, resources, and effort.

Rituals are a unique medium for costly signalling that extend beyond interpersonal relationships. Just as the actions of caregivers and other in-group members predict generational belief transmission, rituals of the in-group help to bind members, acting as markers of credibility and trustworthiness. Anthropological and sociological research demonstrates that rituals serve social functions, such as creating social cohesion and promoting shared beliefs (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). Because rituals involve shared experiences among group members that often require personal sacrifice, rituals may contribute to increased social cohesion and foster the longevity of social groups (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). The solidification of patriotism in Australia is directly comparable. Anzac deification, when it is bereft of historical facts, serves to bind the imagined community, resulting in a familiar “us” versus “them” mentality.

The groups at the heart of these interactions are not bound by genetic relatedness. Modern humans function as members of large-scale, anonymous societies despite living predominantly in small-scale, hunter-gatherer groups only some 12,000 years ago (Johnson and Earle 2000). The existence of large-scale human cooperation is one of the greatest puzzles in our evolutionary history, given the assumption that group expansion leads to a subsequent inflation of the “free-rider problem”. This refers to the possibility that individuals within a society may fail to contribute fairly to the needs of the group whilst consuming more than their fair share of resources (Norenzayan 2013). Increasing group size also decreases biological relatedness amongst members, endangering traditional systems of reciprocity amongst kin groups (Norenzayan et al. 2016).

As previously discussed, parallels in the use of ritual, music, and movement between memorial ceremonies and religious ones have been identified (dawn services, parades, etc.), including their potential to foster a sense of group cohesion. Validation of, and commitment to, moral truths is intensified through movement, sound, smell, touch and sight (e.g. Alcorta and Sosis 2005). Frequently recurring religious behaviour, such as silent prayer or movement to music, is capable of stimulating the dopamine-based reward system in practicing individuals (Schjodt et al. 2008). In displays of cooperative commitment, rituals involve sequential, socially interactive movements and gestures that synchronise affective states among members. Effects exist beyond the temporal frame in which members engage. For example, Alcorta and Sosis (2005, p. 349) describe music as “an abstract representation of ritual that can be recreated across time and space to evoke the emotions elicited by ritual.” Particularly when individual goals are shared communally, synchronous expressions can strengthen cooperation and feelings of solidarity among members, and even produce physical changes, for example, increasing tolerable pain thresholds (Atran 2002; Cohen et al. 2010; Reddish et al. 2013). In fact, greater engagement with costly ritual is associated with better rates of group survival over time (Sosis and Bressler 2003).

The nature of investment in non-kin appears less puzzling through this lens. In modern societies, kin groups are no longer the basis of conflict and cooperation. “Us” and “them” may be bound instead by concepts of fictive kinship (Atran 2003; Qirko 2004). Despite the lack of genetic ties, group members, through processes like shared ritual and moral consensus, come to be equated as kin. Altruistic tendencies underlying familial structures, including willingness to make personal sacrifice for the sake of others, are demonstrated towards the group (Qirko 2013; Henrich and Henrich 2006). In his investigation of extremist behaviour, Atran (2010) suggests that people kill and die for more than a cause; “They do it for friends – campmates, schoolmates, workmates... but nearly all in devotion to a family-like group of friends and mentors”. For a society far removed from such a realm of conflict and combat, and increasingly indifferent to institutions of religiosity, Anzac provides a shared story of identity for Australians based on the ostensible uniqueness of the “Anzac spirit”.

Sacredness and the Backfire Effect

Anzac is more than just an important idea. For Australians in general, at least today, it demonstrates the characteristics of a sacred value. Though “sacred” is a commonly used term, we refer to the empirical definition—a value for which one would trade no amount of monetary value or sacrifice for material gain (a commonly relatable example being that of democracy). Given its intrinsic significance to the believer, the evaluation of a sacred value in quantifiable or economic terms is considered taboo (for example, the economic worth of a child to their parent; Ginges et al. 2007).

Though the concept of God(s) is a typical example of sacredness, there are technically no limits to the items or ideas that may come to be considered sacred within cultural bounds. Ritual processes are the medium by which the profane is transformed into the sacred; “Holy water is not simply water that has been discovered to be holy, or water that has been rationally demonstrated to have special qualities. It is, rather, water that has been transformed through ritual” (Rappaport 1999). In the emergence of the sacred from the otherwise profane, associations between target concepts and emotions are conditioned, creating symbolic representations capable of strengthening cooperation within the group and motivating progroup behaviour. This concept is important in understanding the changing nature of the Anzac legend over time, with growing public support described by historians (e.g. Cochrane 2015; Holbrook 2014) correlating with the viciousness of attacks levelled at critics by Anzac’s defenders.

Indeed, the sacred nature of Anzac provides insight into observations of public backlash at perceived threat to the value. In a 2015 media campaign launched by Woolworths, one of Australia’s largest grocery chains, the supermarket’s logo was superimposed over images of ANZAC soldiers with the slogan, “Fresh in our memory.” Accused of trivialising and commercialising Anzac, Woolworths received fierce criticism (Knott 2015). On Anzac Day 2017, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, a Sudanese-Australian media presenter and writer, created an intense public backlash in reaction to her post on Twitter (Whigham 2017): “Lest. We. Forget (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)”. The use of a phrase traditionally reserved for commemoration only within the bounds of group ideals—“Lest We Forget”—triggered a defensive response when used in support of these out-groups. Yassmin, labelled a “Muslim apologist” unsuitable for her role by conservative and Murdoch-owned media (Bolt 2017), deleted the post and apologised.

These are instances consistent with a phenomenon known as the “backfire effect” (Atran and Ginges 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). In an exploration of consumers’ attitudes towards different social media campaigns, scholars of business and marketing (Arli and Dietrich 2017), discuss public backfire specifically associated with the Woolworths Anzac campaign. The authors, however, use the term generally and in absence of key literature regarding backfire as a psychological construct underpinned by identifiable social and cognitive factors; an example of the need to draw interdisciplinary links in this area.

Given the uniquely intrinsic value of the sacred, decisions regarding sacred values are not based on instrumental reasoning—we apply different rules and have different expectations. Not only are material incentives considered taboo but attempts at the negotiation of sacred values by economic means can backfire, triggering moral outrage and support for pro-group action (Ginges et al. 2007; Atran et al. 2007). Similarly, backfire can occur when deeply held convictions are challenged, ultimately strengthening commitment in an attempt to undermine it. This is most likely to occur when contested beliefs form part of the individual’s identity or self-concept (Trevors et al. 2016). For example, presenting negative information about a political candidate to those who support them can result in increased support (Redlawsk 2002), and presenting evidence in favour of vaccinations to parents with antivaccination attitudes can increase the likelihood that they believe relevant myths (a link between autism and vaccination; Nyhan et al. 2014).

In a recent media release, Holbrook, historian and author of *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*, considers that Anzac is more culturally powerful than traditional religious holidays like Easter and Christmas, “plugging a spiritual hole” no longer filled by organised religion (Deakin University 2018). This sentiment reflects that of displaced Christianity and is consistent with the capacity of myth to morph and change in response to group needs and priorities. It is unsurprising overall that, despite a wealth of historical resources available, including exhaustively researched accounts of the First World War published during the centenary, your average citizen will not be easily swayed to reconsider the powerful legend that underpins an “Aussie” identity.

Conclusion

Anzac in Australia is an example of a secular belief system that fits the mould of a religion. Despite advances in the study of religiosity across diverse fields since Inglis first compared Anzac to religion in the 1960s, the study of Anzac as religiosity has remained largely entrenched in the humanities. Existing explanations for Anzac’s sacred status put forward by historians and scholars of religion contain vital insights, but they do not provide a complete answer. To help solve the puzzle, we have focused on understanding the social, cognitive, and environmental mechanisms of devotion, using current research in the area of the scientific study of religiosity and sacredness to account for the Anzac belief system. Breaking disciplinary walls emphasises the limitations of a discipline-specific focus. The same combination of factors key to an integrative analysis of religiosity map also onto belief and behaviour regarding Anzac.

Anzac is an important part of Australian identity, but Anzac is an important part of Australian identity. Those who promote the salience of historical truth, or who offer countervailing arguments to the dominant national narrative, come under public fire. Yet, as we have shown, this status quo is supported by more than an uncritical mainstream media and

film industry, opportunistic popular history writers, and a political class invested in keeping alive the imagined community Anzac provides. Our own ordinary cognitive processes embed the behaviours, thoughts, and schemas that make Anzac impervious to historical fact. Generational transmission of Anzac is bolstered by minimally counterintuitive narrative elements, public primes, participation in ritual, and exposure to credibility enhancing displays. The benefits of adherence manifest in cooperative outcomes and increased strength of the in-group. However, in-group identification comes at a cost to rationality. Believers sacrifice time and resources, as well as intellectual integrity, in the name of a sacred cause.

Just as key findings regarding religious devotion can extend explanatory capacity to Australia's devotion in this case, there will be other case studies that could benefit from the breaking down of disciplinary walls, including any historical topic where the consensus of academic historians has not appreciably dented the popularity of national mythologies. Taves (2015) argues that accurately identifying and labelling the various cognitive processes which interact to create adherence to religion and spirituality will assist historians and anthropologists to analyse these complex cultural phenomena in situ. More practical applications are also imaginable. For example, insight into the key constructs of devotion may form the foundation of thoughtful teaching and learning interventions that gently inspire critical thinking (encouraging greater circumspection of Anzac can be challenging—a problem detected in tertiary classrooms by Ford et al. 2019).

After half-a-century of relative stagnation, the parallels observable between Anzac and religiosity are open to a flood of useful research that has run for decades alongside the walls that surround traditional scholarship in this area.

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