Popular Religion
Convenor: Professor Adam Possamai

Interest in the study of popular religions, eg religion and popular culture, studies in alternative spiritualities and new religious movements, and religion on the Internet is growing. The Religion and Society Research Centre (RSRC) currently houses two leading international scholars in this sub-field of research. Professor Possamai has proven to be an international leader in the field of religion and popular culture by coining the term ‘hyper-real religion’ and recently edited a Handbook on the topic. His research marked the first attempt to analyse from a social scientific perspective, what people do with popular culture religiously.

Professor Howell is a pioneer in identifying the emergence of the notion of ‘spirituality’, drawing on themes from the global spiritual marketplace, specifically in popular Islamic discourse in Southeast Asia. She has shown that this has occurred largely through the neo-Sufism movement but is now pervasive across the spectrum of moderate to liberal Islamic religiosity. Her work on Islamic televangelism in Southeast Asia and new ‘training’ businesses offering hybridised Islamic spirituality and popular psychology for personal development and business management, is also contributing to the comparative study of contemporary popular religion and modernisation.


Current Projects

- **Neo-Sufism**
  In September 2011, the Centre organised an international conference, *Sufism for a New Age*, to explore the potential of the Sufi heritage. This was done to inspire new forms of spiritual humanism and cosmopolitanism, as a counter to religious and ethnic exclusivism. A direct result of the conference, were two special issues of the *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* and the *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* on neo-Sufism which were published in 2012 and 2013. As part of this project, Milad Milani, after publishing his *Sufism in the Secret History of Persia* in 2013 with Acumen, is currently studying neo-Sufism as a third social force in Australia.

- **Aborigines and Contemporary Religion**
  In 2009, Helena Onnudottir, Adam Possamai and Bryan Turner began an extensive analysis of Australian and New Zealand Census data over the past 15 years. Focusing on the Census questions relating to religion, they discovered that an increasingly growing number of aboriginals in these countries were reporting themselves to be ‘non-religious’. This finding led to the publication of various articles, book chapters and media accounts on the topic, as well as the March 2012 Religious Change and Indigenous Populations in the Antipodes symposium which focused on the broader issue of aborigines and contemporary religion. The first phase of the project lead to the publication of *Religious Change and Indigenous Peoples: The Making of Religious Identities* in 2013 with Ashgate.

  In 2013, a successful UWS IRIS grant allowed RSRC to invite Professor James Cox, University of Edinburgh, to study aboriginal understanding of ‘religion’ with Adam Possamai and George Morgan. Professor Cox is an internationally recognised expert in the areas of the
phenomenology of religion and indigenous religions. An edited book on this topic will be published with Ashgate in 2015.

- **Popular Religion and the Supernatural**
  RSRC is currently drawing on the expertise of Tony Jinks on the Psychology of Paranormal Belief and Experience and Geir Presterudstuen’s work on the anthropology of popular religion, to develop this new project.