



SYMPOSIUM · WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY & UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

(Dis)comfort in Religious and Spiritual Places and Practices

DATE
Wednesday, 24 June 2026

VENUE
Zoom [[link on website](#)]

FORMAT
Online

Considering (dis)comfort

Religious and spiritual practices have been historically understood as providing moral comfort. In fact, for Durkheim, comfort is the express purpose of social participation in religious rites. Sara Ahmed (2014, p.148) describes comfort as a sense of ‘fit’ between the body and its surroundings, that is, “To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins”. Conversely, discomfort may come from feeling dis-ease with one’s environment. Certainly, as much as some religious / spiritual communities go to great lengths to create comfortable environments that support belonging, vulnerability and divine connections, the character of many other religious / spiritual rites and practices (such as pilgrimages, fasting and exorcisms) centre around increasing discomfort or even promoting (physical) suffering in the service of piety and/ or spiritual enlightenment.

Moreover, just as religious / spiritual spaces are racialised and classed, so too are experiences of (dis)comfort within these spaces. Socially marginalised people, such as those who are negatively racialised (Weng et al 2021, Chui et al 2020) or those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Jennings 2023; Dalton 2023; Baird et al 2024) can experience discomfort, even harm, in spaces of faith where other's comfort is prioritised, catered to, or sanctified. Indeed, within religious and spiritual places multifaceted experiences of (dis)comfort are calibrated, embraced, resisted, negotiated, and reimaged.

In this online symposium, we welcome nuanced examinations of (dis)comfort in contemporary religious and spiritual communities.

We are interested in contributions that critically consider:

- How, why and for whom is comfort calibrated in spiritual / religious communities?
- How comfort is materialised, constructed and experienced in places of worship / spiritual engagement?
- How is (dis)comfort experienced physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually in religio-spiritual communities?
- What role do class, gender, race, sexuality, and ability play in experiencing (dis)comfort in religious and spiritual communities?
- How are relationships between religion and non-religion / secularism structured by feelings of (dis)comfort?
- How do researchers navigate personal experiences of comfort and discomfort when conducting research with religious / spiritual communities?

Organised by **Jerrold Cuperus**, Religious Studies, University of Queensland · j.cuperus@uq.edu.au and **Kathleen Openshaw**, Religion and Society Research Cluster, Western Sydney University · K.Openshaw@westernsydney.edu.au

Schedule

Time	Session / Event	Presenter(s)	Comments
09:15	Technical preparation		For presenters in the first block
09:30	Opening & Introduction statement	Kathleen Openshaw & Jerrold Cuperus	
09:50	Conversation 1	Holly Randell-Moon; R. Anthony Lewis & Joseph T. Farquharson	
10:20	Stretch break		Draft questions on whiteboard
10:25	Q & A	conversation 1	
10:35	Conversation 2	Gracie Cayley; Larney Peerenboom	
11:05	Stretch break		Draft questions on whiteboard
11:10	Q & A	conversation 2	
11:20	Reflection session		Break out or plenary: artefact
11:30	Lunch break		Reconvene at 12:30
12:20	Technical preparation		For presenters in the second block
12:30	Conversation 3	Bernard Doherty; Shweta Goyal; Jerrold Cuperus	
13:15	Stretch break		Draft questions on whiteboard
13:20	Q & A	conversation 3	
13:35	Conversation 4	Charlotte Tribouillois; Cindy Stocken	
14:05	Q & A	conversation 4	
14:10	Coffee break		
14:30	Conversation 5	Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta; Scholar Kaaria; Louise Gosbell, Erin Hutton & Jenny Richards	
15:15	Stretch break		Draft questions on whiteboard
15:20	Q & A	conversation 5	
15:35	Stretch break		Prepare final statements & reflection comments
15:45	Reflection session		Break-out & plenary: artefact making
16:15	Closing statement	Jerrold Cuperus & Kathleen Openshaw	

Presenters



Holly Randell-Moon

Charles Sturt University

Eco-horror, Māori culture, and secular discomfort in Belief: The Possession of Janet Moses

This paper critically investigates the eco-horror framing of māku in the New Zealand documentary-drama film *Belief: The Possession of Janet Moses* (2015). The film focuses on the death of Janet Moses and injury to a family member resulting from a series of healing ceremonies performed by their family. Unlike the film, the interest in this paper lies not in interrogating the 'truth' of māku. Rather it interrogates how the eco-horror framing of the latter in the film works to present Māori spirituality as an existential threat that entraps families and places. The film frames and presents māku through gothic tropes of exorcism and suburban horror. This occurs through a delayed narrative where contextual information regarding the injuries and death incurred by the family are revealed through narrative twists. In particular, where Māori truths are framed through point-of-view shots and close-ups, non-Indigenous truths are contextualised by establishing shots of libraries, police stations, and legal courts. The analysis demonstrates how eco-horror can be used to deploy racialising and colonising knowledges to generate settler secular discomforts with First Nations spirituality.

ABOUT

Holly is a non-Indigenous researcher who uses critical race and whiteness studies theories to situate her Anglo-Celtic family and settler ancestors within the social and built landscapes of settler colonisation. Holly has published on race, religion, and sovereignty in the journals *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, *borderlands*, and *Social Semiotics*. She edits *Somatechnics: Journal of Bodies – Technologies – Power*.



R. Anthony Lewis & Joseph T. Farquharson

UTech & The University of the West Indies, Jamaica

Battling Obeah: Modernity, Evangelicalism, and the Re-inscription of Creole–African Plantation Dichotomies in Contemporary Jamaica

In 2019, Jamaica's Minister of Justice proposed repealing the country's 1898 Obeah Act (amended 2013). Succeeding legislation dating back to 1760, the law broadly prohibits spiritual practices commonly framed as occult, malignant, and/or fraudulent. The proposal met with strong public pushback, especially from Evangelical church leaders, many either unaware of or uninterested in the law's antecedents in the suppression of African resistance to slavery. This paper argues that opposition to the repeal reflects not merely religious apprehension or legal disinterest but a persistent yet ideologically constructed tension between modernity and Africanness. The paper contends that Evangelicalism, now functioning as a site of legitimacy and aspirational religious identity in Jamaica, exacerbates this tension. Drawing on creole theory and critical discourse analysis, it examines how neo-colonial religious formations encode hierarchies of modernity and backwardness and reinscribe Creole–African dichotomies rooted in the plantation social order.

ABOUT

R. Anthony Lewis holds a PhD in linguistics (translation) from the University of Montreal. He is Associate Professor of Language, Culture, and Society at UTech, Jamaica.

Dr. Joseph T. Farquharson is a Senior Lecturer at The University of the West Indies, Mona campus, and Coordinator of the Jamaican Language Unit. His latest book is *Reimagining Creole Communities*.



Gracie Cayley

Curtin University

Understanding Purity Culture in Contemporary Western Australia

Honours research examined Purity Culture in contemporary Western Australia, focusing on the body as a site of religious ritual, social surveillance and the embodied discomfort that comes from transgressing taboo. Drawing on qualitative interviews with ten young adults raised within WA Christian environments, this study explored how participants understood purity-based teachings around sexuality, gender, desire and relationships. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, it argues that contemporary Purity Culture operates through mechanisms of discomfort that position bodies and sexuality as morally dangerous, intertwining discourses of danger, taboo, and moral order into shame-based sexual teachings. Participants described experiences of shame, confusion, self-monitoring, and discomfort in relation to their bodies, relationships, and sexual identities, consistent with existing American literature.

ABOUT

Gracie Cayley is an early-career qualitative researcher with a particular research interest in young people's attitudes towards sexuality and gender, especially within religious contexts. She has an Honours degree in Anthropology and Sociology from Curtin University in Western Australia (Claire Mann Prize, 2022) and works as a Community Engagement Coordinator with Cancer Council WA.



Larney Peerenboom

Deakin University

Comfort as Strategy: How Institutionally Managed (Dis)comfort Produces Church Hurt in Australian Megachurches

Within Australian megachurches, the comfort of belonging can become discomfort – and even harm – when that comfort is institutionally produced, managed, and strategically deployed. This presentation reports findings from doctoral research employing constructivist grounded theory to examine 26 women's experiences of 'church hurt' in Australian megachurches. It argues that harm operates through institutionally produced experiences of (dis)comfort, normalising conditions of harm before they become legible as such. Three mechanisms are identified: institutional image management; conditional belonging as social control; and systemic exploitation, which spiritualises the extraction of women's labour and loyalty.

ABOUT

Larney Peerenboom (she/her) is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, based in Sydney, Australia. Her doctoral research examines the mechanisms that produce women's experiences of 'church hurt' in Australian megachurches and the spiritual reorientation processes that follow.



Bernard Doherty

Charles Sturt University

Our Religion is a Horror Show! Reflections from a Decade Studying the Dark Side of Catholicism

More than any other American writer, Flannery O'Connor has often been considered the exemplar of what Andrew Greeley called the "Catholic Imagination" – a strongly incarnational religious sensibility which seeks to glimpse the divine in the everyday. Despite this, O'Connor's oeuvre was concerned almost entirely with the dark side of religion. This paper brings O'Connor into conversation with Robert Orsi to reflect on a decade of studying the dark side of Roman Catholicism, looking at themes ranging from demonology to clerical abuse. Orsi highlighted "the importance of studying and thinking about despised religious idioms," practices "that make us uncomfortable, unhappy, frightened—and not just to study them but to bring ourselves into close proximity to them."

ABOUT

Bernard Doherty is Associate Head of School and Associate Professor in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University, based at St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra. He is also an Honorary Fellow of INFORM (Information Network Focus On Religious Movements), UK.



Shweta Goyal

Independent Researcher

From Arjuna's Despair to Inner Equanimity: The Bhagavad Gita as a Framework for Understanding Spiritual Discomfort

While discomfort in religion is often examined through exclusion or embodied practices, this paper shifts attention to discomfort as an internal experience that spiritual traditions themselves seek to diagnose and transform. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews with practitioners of Gita-informed yoga therapy and Hindu diaspora communities in India and Australia, this paper examines how the Bhagavad Gita offers a framework for moving from inner disorientation toward emotional regulation, ethical clarity, and resilience. It contributes a non-Western perspective to discussions of (dis)comfort, considering how ancient concepts may speak to contemporary experiences of anxiety, trauma, and identity conflict.

ABOUT

Shweta Goyal is a researcher, educator, and author whose work explores intersections between Indian philosophy, psychology, and lived experience. Her research examines the Bhagavad Gita as a framework for understanding suffering, resilience, and wellbeing, with a focus on Hindu diaspora communities and yoga therapy practitioners in India and Australia.



Charlotte Tribouillois

Australian National University

Navigating (Dis)comfort in Mediumship within Australian Spiritualism

This paper explores how experiences of comfort and discomfort are intertwined in the practice of mediumship within Australian Spiritualist groups. For recipients, grief may be temporarily eased through a sense of reunion with the deceased. These encounters can bring comfort, consolation, and healing; yet they also reawaken underlying discomfort by reminding recipients of their loved ones' continued absence. Mediums also experience emotional ambivalence, as readings are marked by uncertainty: connections with the afterlife may fail, or evidence may be deemed insufficient. This paper argues that mediumship emerges as a complex interplay between comfort and discomfort, in which spiritual encounters simultaneously soothe and unsettle social actors.

ABOUT

Charlotte is a PhD candidate at the School of Culture, History, and Language, ANU. She holds a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a master's degree in Pacific studies. Her research explores spirituality, spirit entities, and representations of the afterlife in Australian societies.



Cindy Stocken

University of Melbourne

Living Wakes: (dis)comfort in an emerging ritual

By the late twentieth century funerals came to be celebrations of the deceased's life in personalised "celebration of life" formats (Garces-Foley 2022). An emerging example is the living wake, where a dying person invites guests to a gathering before they die to say goodbye and celebrate their life. Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with those who have hosted living wakes and deathcare workers, this paper explores how the ritual creation takes (dis)comfort into account and often includes deliberate participatory elements to ease this. These elements, however, at times create their own moments of (dis)comfort.

ABOUT

Cindy's PhD builds on previous research exploring ritual creativity amongst alternative deathcare workers, and is focused on living funerals and similar rituals emerging globally. She is particularly interested in the choices that we make around marking bereavement, who is involved, what creative work ensues, and how participants respond.



Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta

Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja

When Piety Hurts: A Feminist Theological Analysis of Women's Discomfort in Indonesian Churches

This paper examines dynamics of comfort and discomfort in Christian worship spaces in Indonesia through a feminist theological lens. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of comfort as the "fit" between bodies and spaces, it explores how Indonesian church contexts construct ideals of femininity through expectations of modest dress, bodily discipline, and moral propriety. In this process, discomfort is not only tolerated but often reinterpreted as a form of piety. The paper argues that the comfort experienced within these worship spaces is contingent upon the disciplining of women's bodies, and calls for a reimagining of church spaces as sites of genuine inclusivity and justice.

ABOUT

Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta is a researcher in theology with a focus on feminist theology, trauma studies, and embodiment in religious contexts. He is a Lecturer at Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja, Indonesia.



Scholar Kaaria

University of Nairobi / Faith to Action Network, Kenya

Spiritualized Suffering: GBV Survivors and Discomfort in Religious Spaces

This paper examines how survivors of gender-based violence experience discomfort within religious communities when their suffering is interpreted through theological frameworks that emphasize endurance, forgiveness, or spiritual testing. Drawing on feminist theological analysis and survivor-centred perspectives, it explores how religious interpretations of suffering may unintentionally legitimize silence and delay justice-seeking. The paper argues that discomfort is not only emotional but also embodied, social, and spiritual, and that faith can also be a source of resilience and recovery when interpreted through justice-oriented, trauma-informed lenses.

ABOUT

Scholar is a Gender Justice and SRHR strategist, researcher, and PhD candidate in Gender and Development Studies. Her work focuses on faith actors, gender-based violence, social norms transformation, survivor-centred approaches, and the role of religious institutions in advancing gender justice in African contexts.



Louise Gosbell, Erin Hutton & Jenny Richards

Australian University of Theology & Flinders University

Whose comfort? Disability and the management of discomfort in Christian churches

This joint presentation examines how, why and for whom comfort is calibrated in Christian churches, attending to the bodies and spiritual experiences of people with disability. The argument is made that what is framed as offering comfort frequently produces discomfort for disabled people while assuaging the discomfort of non-disabled people confronted by disability. Two case studies develop this argument: the persistent charity model of disability, and prevailing theologies of healing. Drawing on Paul's image of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, the paper contends not for accommodation but for mutuality: a re-calibration in which the comfort of disabled and non-disabled people is shared as an outworking of Christian faith.

ABOUT

Louise Gosbell is the Research Manager at the Australian University of Theology. Her research focuses on disability in the Bible and inclusive church practices.

Erin Martine Hutton is an award-winning poet and interdisciplinary scholar who writes on religion and violence, drawing on lived experience of disability.

Jenny Richards is a Senior Lecturer in Law at Flinders Law School. As a disabled scholar, she sits on access and inclusion advisory bodies for Flinders University and the South Australian Uniting Church Synod.

— Convenors —



Jerrold Cuperus

University of Queensland

Flows and rips: calibrating (dis)comfort in contemporary-style churches

'Contemporary-style' churches go to great lengths to make their buildings, people, services, and events feel welcoming and comfortable. During ethnographic research in 20 Pentecostal churches in South East Queensland, interviews were conducted with pastors, creative team members, and technicians who create 'distraction-free environments for worship'. This paper argues that this carefully crafted baseline comfort also makes uncomfortable moments much more potent. Zooming in on a particularly uncomfortable 'altar call'-moment, it is shown that church staff actively calibrate comfort and discomfort using silence, bright lights, and a redirection of focus from stage to audience. Comfort and discomfort are not opposing 'states', but mutually constitutive dynamics of religious practice, which derive their power from expertly cultivated atmospheres.

ABOUT

Dr Jerrold Cuperus is a qualitative researcher at The University of Queensland. He attained his PhD in religious studies and anthropology at UQ, where his research focused on multimedia and production technologies in Australian 'contemporary-style' and Pentecostal churches. He is interested in material religion, technology, and religious presence in the public sphere.



Kathleen Openshaw

Western Sydney University

Thinking about and through (dis)comfort

It has taken many years of confronting and emotionally laboursome reflections on doing fieldwork in a controversial, high demand global Pentecostal megachurch to allow myself to think aloud about and through (dis)comfort in religious places and practices. I come to this through an ongoing grappling with the methodological and ethical dimensions of navigating power, vulnerability and harms in spiritual and faith communities.

ABOUT

Dr Kathleen Openshaw is a senior lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, and the Director of the Religion and Society Research Cluster, at Western Sydney University. Her main research interests include migrant lived religious expressions, material religion, and social sustainability during polycrisis. She was a lead researcher for an ARC Discovery Project, "The African Diaspora and Pentecostalism in Australia". Her forthcoming ethnography of The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Australia will be published with Rutgers University Press.

Additional Information

Venue

This online conference will take place on Zoom. A link will be shared with participants shortly before the symposium. All sessions will be held via the same Zoom link. Please do not share the Zoom link with anyone, and do not post it anywhere online. If there is anyone you would like to invite, please ask them to email the convenors. Presentations will be recorded (with consent); discussions and Q&A; will not be recorded.

Online etiquette

Participating in online seminars can be tiring. Feel free to drop in and out of sessions as needed — just make sure you turn off your microphone and camera before re-joining. During presentations, we encourage everyone to turn on their cameras so the presenter can see their audience. Ensure that your space is professional, or use a Zoom background. Moderators may ask you to turn off your microphone/camera via the chat. We reserve the right to remove persons who exhibit distracting or unprofessional behaviour. During stretch and coffee breaks, we encourage participants to use the Zoom whiteboard to draft questions to presenters. During Q&A;, presenters may choose a question and might ask participants to expand verbally.

For presenters

Presentations are paired into 'conversations' as per the schedule. Individual presentations should be 12–15 minutes maximum. Please be respectful of your fellow presenters' time.

Ensure your equipment (microphone, camera) produces quality sound and image. Please join the 'technical prep' session before your presentation if needed. Avoid backlighting; consider a ring light.

Presenters may share their screen for slides (not required). As a backup, please send slides the day before. If uncertain about your WiFi, consider pre-recording your presentation.

Accessibility

If you have any accessibility needs (keeping in mind the online format), please get in touch with the organisers.

Contact

For any queries, please contact Jerrold Cuperus (j.cuperus@uq.edu.au) or Kathleen Openshaw (K.Openshaw@westernsydney.edu.au).