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'Our diggers would turn in their graves': nostalgia and civil religion in Australia's far-right

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Abstract: Commemorating wars plays an important role in reinforcing a sense of national identity in many countries. Bellah's (1967) work on civil religion argues that such commemorations have a quasi-sacred character and can have cohesive-inclusive and coercive-exclusive effects. This article examines how references to the Australian New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) are incorporated into far-right messaging online where the Anzac legend is typically discussed with the purpose of conveying a nostalgic image of a narrowly defined, exclusionary national identity. Unconditional glorification of Anzac is used as a benchmark of acceptance, often linked to anti-Muslim messaging and sometimes embedded in a White supremacy agenda. The official Anzac commemorations remain mute to far-right attempts to use Anzac for their own political mobilisation.

Introduction

Commemorating war commonly centres on remembering the sacrifices of soldiers and paying respect to those who died in service to their country. War memorials are common features in public spaces, and public holidays have been established to commemorate military exploits, and the endurance and sacrifices of soldiers in many countries, such as Remembrance Day in the US, Armistice Day in France, or Anzac Day in Australia and New Zealand. These form a central part of the countries' 'civil religion' (Bellah 1967) and contribute to shaping and strengthening national identity. As Bellah (1967, 13) noted in the US American context, 'civil religion was able to build up ... powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivations for the attainment of national goals'.

Like national identity itself, the interpretation of historical military actions as part of a country's civil religion is often contested and subject to substantial disagreement between groups with different political allegiances and ideologies. This article analyses the ways in which Australians at the far-right fringes of the political spectrum refer to the Anzac legend, a central element of the country's civil religion. Acknowledging the extensive academic literature on Anzac as 'the sacred in the secular' (Seal 2007), this article seeks to make an empirical contribution to the still underdeveloped scholarship on Australia's far-right (Peucker and Smith 2019) in the context of

the broader academic work on what Thomson ([2013](#), 312) called the ‘plasticity’ of the Anzac legend. At the heart of this analysis is the question as to how radical right actors have taken advantage of this ambiguous nature of Anzac, using it as a powerful vehicle to convey their radical political agenda.

References to wars and other military actions are common features in the online mobilisation rhetoric of extreme and radical right-wing groups around the world. Battles, often hundreds of years in the past, are typically framed in ways to convey narratives of ethno-nationalism, anti-Semitism, White superiority or Islamophobia. One of the most common examples is the Christian Crusades between the 11th and 13th centuries. Social media pages and online platforms of far-right groups and individuals are full of references to this alleged ‘war against Muslims’, and the language of crusades has been widely adopted in right-wing extremist circles to refer to the claimed urgency of fighting back ‘Muslim invaders’ in the allegedly Christian heartland (Koch [2017](#)). This language has also materialised in the murderous acts of White supremacists, such as Australian-born convicted terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, who shot dead 51 Muslims in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019. Tarrant described his killing spree in his manifesto as ‘revenge against Islam for the 1300 years of war and devastation that it has brought upon the people of the West and other peoples of the world’.

Commemorating wars, like any historic event, always involves a process of interpretative meaning-making, influenced by specific agendas and worldviews of individuals, groups and nations. This implies that military remembrance can become a battleground of different versions of national identity, where the officially sanctioned commemoration may coincide or collide with the interpretation of certain (radical) groups. Drawing on Johnson’s ([2005](#)) differentiation between *organic* and *instrumental* civil religion, this article examines how far-right groups in Australia frame the Australian New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), especially during World War I, and the Anzac legend as a central element of Australia’s civil religion (Freeland [1985](#); Black [1990](#); Linder [1988](#); Inglis [2008](#); Seal [2007](#)), in their messaging online. Our analysis demonstrates that these groups use references to Anzac to paint a nostalgic image of a narrowly defined national identity, which they claim has come under threat from both outside and within Australia. This representation of Anzac resonates with what Taggart ([2004](#), 274) referred to as ‘heartland’, an ideal of the good life, ‘constructed retrospectively from the past’, which ‘unlike utopias, ... has already been lived and so shown to be feasible’.

The sacralisation of politics: Anzac at the heart of Australia’s civil religion

The construction of civil religion is part of broader processes of the sacralisation of politics, which began in the eighteenth century, especially after the French Revolution wherein entities such as the state, political processes, and the nation and people, began to acquire sacred status. According to Gentile ([2006](#), xiv),

[b]y taking over the religious dimension of acquiring a sacred nature, politics went so far as to claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and

fundamental aim of human existence for individuals and the collectivity, at least on this earth.

The sacralisation of politics includes two main forms: first, an exclusivist political religion, in which popular exaltation of nations, leaders, and ideologies are narrowly defined. Theological matters are suppressed and subordinated to official ideologies, which elevate distinct peoples, states and leaders in the polities, and deliberately exclude others (Gentile [2005](#), 30). These would include Hitler's Nazi Regime (Vondung [2005](#)), Mussolini's Fascist Italy (Gentile [1990](#)), and communist party-ruled states (Riegel [2005](#)), especially before Mikhail Gorbachev introduced *perestroika*. Second, civil religion is a means to unite diverse peoples on a basis of equality, shared experiences and values, and bind them into a civic congregation. Theologies are treated on an equal footing – although as Bellah ([1967](#)) and others (Gorski [2017](#); Linder [1988](#)) have indicated – in most Western democracies they were and are overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian in their orientations.

In the Australian context, the 'conceptual complex of history, folklore, commemoration and place known as "Anzac"' (Seal [2007](#), 135) and, more specifically, Anzac Day constitutes a core component of the country's civil religion (Freeland [1985](#); Black [1990](#); Linder [1988](#)). Such a perspective on the sacralisation of Anzac is firmly established in Australian scholarship (Seal [2007](#); Inglis [2008](#)).

The ANZAC was formed in 1914 in Egypt and fought during World War I, World War II and Vietnam. The ANZAC are specifically associated with the 'Battle of Gallipoli', their first deployment during World War I. The ANZAC and other allied troops landed on the shores of Gallipoli in 1915 but failed to break through Turkish lines, which led to months of military stalemate, many thousands of casualties on both sides and ultimately the withdrawal of allied troops, including the ANZAC. Australia (and New Zealand) commemorates the landing of ANZAC troops on Gallipoli on 25 April with Anzac Day, which today is dedicated to honouring *all* Australian servicemen and women. According to the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs ([n.d.](#)), Anzac Day

is a time for all Australians to recognise the more than 1.5 million service men and women who have served our country in all conflicts, wars and peacekeeping operations. It's also a time to remember the more than 102,000 Australians who sacrificed their lives in our country's name.

Academic work on Anzac has consistently highlighted the ambiguous nature of the Anzac legend and how it is commemorated (Thomson [2013](#); Bromfield and Page [2020](#); Inglis [2008](#)). For some, the Anzac legend itself, celebrating and commemorating death and rebirth, martyrdom, values of service to community and state, egalitarianism, mateship, and the fair go is a civil religion on its own (Linder [1988](#); West [2008](#); Davison [2017](#); Fallon [2017](#); Black [1990](#)). In the words of then Prime Minister Turnbull ([2017](#)), Anzac Day does 'not glorify war', but rather 'commemorates the triumph of the human spirit, the patriotism, the sacrifice, the courage, the endurance, the mateship'. The Anzac legend, however, is not universally accepted as an entirely inclusive concept, as it has been criticised for having a tendency to exclude women, Aboriginal soldiers and other minorities (Fallon [2017](#); Bromfield and Page [2020](#)). Notwithstanding this criticism and

ambiguity, for many, the Anzac legend constitutes an integral part of Australian identity, and the alleged values of the ANZAC troops continue to be evoked to guide the national ethos – although there are different interpretations of what this ethos should encompass.

Commemorating the military involvement of the ANZACs has been an annual ritual for many years. The official Anzac Day program includes a Dawn Service and local parades, combining Christian (e.g. Lord's Prayer) and secular (e.g. national anthem) elements. In recent years, these commemorations have increasingly tried to convey a more inclusive symbolism seeking to demonstrate national unity. The recognition of Aboriginal soldiers within the ANZAC, for example, has become a common feature of many Anzac Day events. These commemorations resonate with what Johnson (2005, 289) calls 'organic civil religion': they are 'emotionally powerful', whilst remaining 'compact in [their] signifying range' as they convey 'little specifically political content', apart from a symbolic calling for national unity and reaffirming the claimed values the ANZACs allegedly represented.

Johnson's (2005) differentiation between organic and instrumental civil religion, a conceptual specification of Bellah's (1967) civil religion, offers a useful perspective for our analysis of Anzac references within Australia's far-right milieus. Johnson (2005, 289) examines how in the aftermaths of the 9/11 terror attacks in New York people started to express their mourning through the construction of improvised memorials around Ground Zero. He argues that these 'relatively inclusive material practices of altar-building' were 'typical for the first civic religious expression' as the collective experiences of 9/11 quickly became part of America's civil religion. These manifestations of 'organic civil religion' were subsequently, in Johnson's (2005, 294) words, 'hijacked by instrumental civil religion' and 'incorporated into the exclusive us/them discourse' (289) as the government mobilises political support for its invasion of Iraq.

Similarly, given both the 'plasticity' of the Anzac legend (Thomson 2013, 312) as part of Australia's civil religion and its centrality in the discourse on national identity, Anzac lends itself to being co-opted for specific political agendas.¹ The ANZACs' military involvement and the way it is being commemorated offer a range of interpretative options. For many the ritualised material practice of Anzac Day symbolises democracy, equality and national unity, resonating with what Johnson (2005) described as 'organic civil religion'. However, references to Anzac are also frequently used by far-right actors for an exclusivist articulation of national identity, anti-Muslim hatred or even White supremacy and, in some instances, as a call for action to 'reclaim' the Australia of their ancestors, which is more aligned with what Johnson (2005) referred to as 'instrumental civil religion'.

Many within Australia, and for the purposes of this paper, Australian far-right actors, consider the Anzac spirit and Anzac Day to be sacred. Francis (2016) argues that the terrain of 'the sacred' is comprised of 'non-negotiable' beliefs and matters, and is a more appropriate moniker for matters pertaining to matters of conflict, extremism and terrorism than religion. As such, the sacred status of the ANZACs, and the Anzac legend more broadly, within Australia's far-right is a non-negotiable component of Australian identity. Accordingly, as this paper argues, Australian far-right actors have been vociferous in protecting the Anzac legend, spirit and ceremonies.

Methodology

For this analysis, we draw on a subset of a larger dataset mined from the Facebook accounts of 12 Australian far-right groups between 2015 and 2017.² We used the term far-right as a generic umbrella to capture radical *and* extreme right-wing groups. Radical and extreme right-wing groups operate within similar ideological terrain but differ in their fundamental attitude towards democratic systems: While right-wing extremism usually includes an explicit anti-democracy stance, radical right groups tend to accept, in principle, the democratic system (although they are usually highly critical of the government), or are at least not explicitly anti-democratic (Minkenberg [2017](#), 27). The 12 Australian far-right groups in our sample were selected based on an initial assessment of their ideological alignment with core characteristics of extreme right-wing groups as identified by scholars such as Mudde ([2000](#)): anti-pluralism and anti-egalitarianism, ethno-nationalism, and racism, including cultural forms of racism (e.g. Islamophobia). Some of the 12 groups can be described as being explicitly anti-democratic, but these extreme right groups were quantitatively speaking, less dominant. However, from a methodological point of view, we do not consider this problematic as our analysis neither claims statistical representativeness nor seeks to quantify the presence of certain ideological frames.

Our entire Facebook data set encompasses approximately 42,000 posts made by the group/page administrators, and 876,000 comments made by some 193,000 individual Facebook users. These 42,000 posts and 876,000 comments constitute the data pool we draw from for this analysis. To analyse the framing and messaging around the Anzac legend and Australian military history among far-right groups, we created a sub-sample of Facebook posts and comments that contain at least one of the following terms: Anzac, digger(s)³ or Gallipoli. This sub-sample encompasses 236 post and 1,495 comments. We conducted a qualitative analysis of all these 236 posts; in addition, we included a random selection of 10 per cent of all these thematically relevant comments ($n = 150$) in our analysis. The thematic analysis of the textual content of these 386 posts and comments followed a qualitative, inductive approach; this was guided by the multi-step process of textual analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke ([2012](#)), which moves from manual coding and re-coding to finding, reviewing and defining core themes in the data.

ANZAC is sacred, but is it Christian?

We found a broad spectrum of diverse, sometimes contradictory ways in which posts and comments on these Facebook accounts referred to ANZAC soldiers ('diggers'), Anzac Day, and the Anzac legend more broadly. Notwithstanding this diversity, our analysis confirms the quasi-religious status attributed to Anzac. Several posts and comments explicitly describe Anzac Day as 'our sacred day'.

This finding is hardly surprising given that scholars, such as Seal ([2007](#)), have highlighted the sacralisation of Anzac, and how the ANZAC's historical military actions and legacy, most visible in Anzac Day, form a core element of Australia's civil religion (Linder [1988](#); Black [1990](#)). Moreover, Fallon ([2017](#), 144) found a variety of interpretations of the Anzac legend among 'ordinary' Australians: 'Anzac is both a point of sacrality and secularity, of inclusion and exclusion'. These

complexities and contradictions also play out in the framing of Anzac on far-right Facebook pages. Moreover, the process of sacralisation, the attribution of religious qualities to notionally secular objects, practices or doctrines (Demerath [2001](#)) is indeed politically significant and fits well into the discursive struggle over national and other cultural symbols. In most instances, revered figured or central institutions of faiths or state define the parameters of the sacred. However, in some circumstances, sacralisations occur from below, and imbue new sets of meaning, significance, and inclusion on those phenomena considered sacred (Montemaggi [2015](#)). In their interpretations of Anzac, Australian far-right actors challenge their opponents, read those they demean as the politically correct left, and the Australian state over the phenomenon's authenticity and legitimacy. Furthermore, they enter into a contest over Australian identity and inclusion through this semiotic contest.

In our data set, the sacralisation of Anzac primarily refers to those who fought in World War I, but is occasionally extended to Australian servicemen and women in subsequent wars and those currently serving in Australia's Armed Forces. Anzac Day is often mentioned in conjunction with Remembrance Day (11 November), a date that marks the end of World War I, and Australia Day (26 January), the country's official national holiday that celebrates the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney 1788 (a date that has become increasingly contested in Australia due to its direct links to colonialism and dispossession of First Nations peoples). These three public holidays play an important role in the Australian calendar and for the country's civil religion, commemorating or celebrating historic events that are fundamental for the collective memory and national identity of (non-Indigenous) Australians. The frequent references to these holidays by Australian far-right groups underscores that nostalgic framing dominates their understanding of what it means to be Australian.

Several posts and comments also liken the significance of Anzac Day to the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, alluding to a Christian foundation to Australia's national identity. In one post, for example, the administrator of a far-right Facebook page makes the following demand: 'Keep our traditional values ie. Christmas, Easter, Australia Day, Anzac Day and other beliefs a large number of Australians have grown up with.' Similarly, another comment reads: 'Yes people who come to Australia should follow our law, customs that includes Christmas, Easter and especially Anzac Day.' While the association between Anzac and Christianity as essential elements of Australia's national identity appear frequently, a more explicitly Christian framing of the Anzac legend was less common, albeit present. One post, for example, states: 'The Christian values our Founding fathers used to establish our Constitution and the same values our ANZACS fought and died for ...'.

In his analysis of Anzac as 'the sacred in the secular', Seal ([2007](#), 135) argues that the sacralisation of Anzac 'is light with signifiers of standard religious rhetoric, observance and dogma' and that the way Anzac is commemorated and sacralised draws more on the 'concept of nation rather than ... religion'. This is not to say that the Anzac legend would not also allow more religious interpretations. The ambiguity around the religious nature of the Anzac legend that Fallon ([2017](#)) found among a cross-section of Australian society is also present within the far-right. This ambiguity is reflective of the notion of civil religion itself, based less on a narrowly defined

theological concept of religion but open to different, although mostly Christian, theologies. Black (1990, 27) argues, drawing on Kapferer (1988), that 'Australian civil religion, as expressed in events associated with Anzac Day, cannot be properly understood apart from the ideological structure of Western Judeo-Christian civilization'. Bellah's (1967, 13) observations about American civil religion also apply to the Anzac: they were 'never anticlerical or militantly secular', and they have always had some religious, i.e. Christian, connotations and elements, such as the traditional Anzac Dawn Service, which includes both the Lord's Prayer and the national anthem.

Australian far-right actors are most often not acting as Christians in the sense of spreading that faith's doctrines in their defence of Christian connotations of Anzac, and more broadly constructing Australia as a Christian country. Rather, such actions and attitudes are more reflective of far-right actors in Europe and elsewhere using Christianity more in symbolic contexts – especially as a cipher to position Western countries and peoples in opposition to non-European cultures and peoples and cultures, notably Islam. Western actors' political and symbolic instrumentalisation of Christianity, and in the process shifting it from largely religious to more secular status, constitutes what has been termed as 'Christianism' (Sullivan 2011; Brubaker 2017).

Honouring the Anzac legend: benchmark for acceptance

Civil religion has the inherent capacity of bringing a diverse society together but also of establishing exclusionary social boundaries. Bellah (1967, 14) argues that America's civil religion 'has not always been invoked in favour of worthy causes. On the domestic scene, an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds'. This dual inclusive/exclusive function of civil religion also applies to the commemoration of Anzac in Australia. Scholars such as Kapferer (1988), have long argued that while the Anzac legend stands for egalitarianism and a 'fair go', it may also manifest itself as a more exclusionary concept that puts segments of society, in particular women, non-Whites and sexual minorities, at the margins (Fallon 2017; Bromfield and Page 2020).

The exclusionary function of civil religion plays a central role in the way Anzac is referred to on the analysed far-right Facebook accounts. A large number of posts and comments convey the message that honouring Anzac constitutes a pivotal precondition of acceptance, or even existence, in Australia. Those whose statements or behaviours are regarded as disrespecting Anzac are viewed as having forfeited their right to be accepted within the fabric of Australian society. On those far-right Facebook pages that push a radical free speech narrative, many comments and posts argue that free speech has crossed a line when the Anzac legend is not sufficiently respected. In this sense, there is an inherent tension in the framing of free speech. Political Correctness is bemoaned as an instrument of the left, used to suppress the expression of far-right ideas, while freedom of expression is denied to those who dare to question the claimed heroic nature of ANZACs. One post stated: 'When you try to trivialise the deaths of 61,572 ANZAC Soldiers you lose the right for anyone to defend your freedom of speech!'

This utilisation of Anzac legend as a benchmark for acceptance represents a prominent feature in many far-right groups. It is articulated in more or less aggressive ways, at times inciting violence. Embedded in a culturally assimilationist tone, a very small number of posts and comments, for example, mentioned the 'welcoming' nature of Australian society, but leave little doubt that this inclusiveness ends when others disrespect Anzac. The following post combines nationalism and the acknowledgement of ethnic diversity with assimilation demands of national pride and respect for the ANZACs:

We don't believe Australia has a skin colour, sure Australia was founded by English white settlers but we are now a Multi-Ethnic country, and there's nothing wrong with that. So long as we don't lose the Australian Culture and Values that made us the country we are. The greatest country in the world. So proud to be white, be proud to be black, be proud to be brown. BUT no matter if you were born here or not. If you live in Australia, be proud to be AUSTRALIAN. Respect the culture, values and true blue spirit that paved the way. Respect the ANZAC's, respect the Traditional land owners, respect each other, RESPECT AUSTRALIA.

Most posts and comments were more aggressive in their use of Anzac as an exclusionary tool and benchmark for acceptance in Australia. Those who are seen as disrespecting Anzac are regularly described as un-Australian outsiders guilty of 'treason'. Statements like the following appeared frequently in the dataset: 'anything that violates our traditions and respect for our diggers are our enemies and should not be on our soil'. Another person even threatened with 'retaliation': '... Mess with our ANZAC day, and there will be retaliation greater than any leftist do-Gooders or terrorist filth could possibly fathom.'

Some of the references to Anzac Day and the ANZACs resonate with what Johnson ([2005](#)) describes as 'instrumental civil religion', using symbols of civil religion as a tool to divide and linking it with a call for actions. In our dataset, this has become particularly evident in one specific incident that attracted enormous attention in 2017, both in the wider public debate as well as among far-right groups. On Anzac Day 2017, the Muslim Sudanese-Australian woman, Yassmin Abdel-Magied, a TV presenter, writer and activist, wrote on her private Facebook page, 'LEST.WE.FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine ...)', which associates the Anzac tradition ('Lest We Forget') with current places of human suffering, including Australia's off-shore detention centres for asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru. Although Abdel-Magied quickly deleted the post and apologised, the incident caused an enormous backlash against her, which included high-profile politicians calling for her being sacked from the public broadcaster where she worked as a part-time presenter.

This incident was the single most referenced incident in relation to Anzac in our dataset. Abdel-Magied's soon deleted post did not only cause outrage among mainstream conservative politicians and news outlets, it triggered countless tirades of hate on far-right Facebook groups, including many calls for her deportation and even death threats:

I cannot wish her well. ANZAC DAY has its importance to me. My grandfather was at Gallipoli and I honor his memory. Yassmin is a disgrace and does not deserve to live in a civilized country. I pity the British if she is now living there.

Deport this serial offender against our anzacs

U deserve nothing but death yassbutt!! Never come back to Auz. U wont survive it. How Dare u insult our ANZACS.!!

This public episode around Abdel-Magied's public comment provided an illustrative case study of how far-right groups and individuals have used references to Anzac to claim cultural-nationalistic hegemony and power to define who has the right to exist in Australia. Her Muslim identity provided a symbolic focal point where her 'transgression' could be used to bolster the broader social construction of Muslims and Islam as an inherent enemy of Australia.

Exclusionary use of the Anzac legend: portraying Muslims as the enemy

Many of the verbal attacks on Abdel-Magied on these Facebook pages made explicit reference to her Muslimness and, in doing so, conveyed anti-Muslim messages: 'If wanting to see every Mudscum Piece of pig poo in this Nation be deported. Makes me ISLAMAPHOBIC SO LET IT BE!!! Especially that ugly tart that spoke against our Anzacs. DEPORT HER FOR TREASON!'

Anti-Muslim narratives have been salient among most far-right groups in Australia (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal [2019](#)). Beyond the controversy around Abdel-Magied, Anzac is often referred to in an explicit, or thinly veiled, attempt to portray Muslims as the enemy and to pitch them against the 'good Australians' who love 'their' Anzac. We identified several framings to express deeper anti-Muslim sentiment.

ANZACs' military actions during World War I were frequently presented as a fight against Muslims and Islam, constructing a narrative frame of historical continuity to the groups' current anti-Islam agenda. Gallipoli is being portrayed as a battle of Australian soldiers against forces of Islam. Many posts and comments allude to this alleged war against Islam by highlighting the Muslim background of the Turkish soldiers in Gallipoli. 'Our Anzacs arrived on the shores of Gallipoli and fought a Muslim caliphate', is a typical example for this anti-Muslim framing. In this context, we also found several references to how Turkish soldiers killed 'Armenian Christians'. One post, for example, reads: '...Gallipoli where so many died defending our freedom against the Muslims of the Ottoman Turkish Caliphate, while the Caliphate murdered over 1.500,000 Armenian Christians. It was genocide.' The claimed heroic nature of the ANZACs' battle against 'Muslim tyranny' is further underscored by claims the ANZAC troops liberated others from oppressive Muslim military forces. The Australian Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savige, for example, is described in one comment as the 'Defender of Assyrian Christian Refugees against the Muslim Turkish Forces'.

Linked to this emphasis on the Muslimness of the military enemy, posts and comments frequently claimed that the ANZACs fought for an Australia that is deeply irreconcilable with Islam. The mere presence of Muslims in twenty-first-century Australia is regarded as

dishonouring the ANZACs' battle for Australia's freedom and way of life, positioning Islam as incompatible with liberalism and what is claimed to be Australian values and culture. This framing of the Anzac legend creates a stark image of Muslims as the antithesis to the heroic ANZAC diggers, who in turn are portrayed as the epitome of the ideal Australian and a symbol for Australia's national identity. One comment sarcastically states, 'Thanks ANZACS for fighting for this country to have Halal meat in our restaurants. They would be rolling in their graves to know this is what they fought for'.

Several posts and comments link anti-Muslim messaging to an explicitly anti-government agenda. Government and political parties are blamed for disrespecting Anzac by allowing Muslims to immigrate to Australia and by tolerating (alleged) Islamic practices, from serving halal food and public praying to child marriage. In reference to such practices one commentator wrote: '... Deceased Anzacs must be rolling in their graves at Politicians not defending our freedom and safety with zero tolerance laws.' The following post makes a direct connection between the battle in Gallipoli and the Australian government allowing Muslims to immigrate:

Our Anzacs arrived on the shores of Gallipoli and fought a Muslim caliphate, to help make Australia what it is today. Today's government is instilling the most severe disrespect to our diggers that fought and lost their lives for this country by allowing the filth that these islamists bring, to settle in Australia. Very poor form, it's time we had a government that will stand up and say enough! Live the Aussie way, or GET OUT OF OUR COUNTRY!

Similarly, another person wrote:

You, the Government, have caused this to happen letting these scum bags into Australia f*** [edited] Muslim c*** [edited], this is an outrageous act you have disrespected our ANZAC'S and there Memories and what they fought for. shame on you shame on you all Labor and Liberal supposedly Leaders.

The use of Anzac references for anti-Muslim messaging does not stop at criticising the government. Various posts and comments also seek to mobilise the Anzac legend for concrete actions, calling on fellow Australians to stand up against Islam in an alleged Anzac tradition. This includes calls to vote for a particular anti-Muslim party:

Stand up Australia, stop this Islamisation of Australia, Vote for people who will fix this before it gets worse, and their momentum is growing. No mosques, no Quran, no burqa, if they dont like our country then go find another one. Make our Anzacs proud, stand and fight for our great land.

Far-right groups also use Anzac as a tool to mobilise people to attend anti-Islam demonstrations. Referring to an anti-mosque rally in the regional town of Bendigo in Victoria, one posts reads: 'Most important place in our history – MUSLIMS WILL NOT WIN!!! The ANZACS must rise again – starting in BENDIGO!!!'. Similarly, another post seeks to encourage people to attend a public anti-Islam rally a few weeks prior to Anzac Day 2015:

25th April 2015, marks the centenary of ANZAC Day ... Those brave men sacrificed their lives to preserve our way of life ... On 4th April I hope Sydney will join us, united, standing together, a show of solidarity to the Extremist Islam that has infected our Country..Lest we forget those who have sacrificed for usIt's time we stood up for ourselves & for their memory!

Other comments are more aggressive and include calls for violence in response to the government allowing Muslim immigration to Australia:

... we the people of Australia put you [the government] on notice, you can't handle this Problem, we will take up arms as our Ancestors did and rid our Country of this Disease [Muslims] you let walk all over our tradition you send money to these Islamic countries but you can't pay to keep the Spirits of the Anzac's marching on in our hearts

The following comment directly addresses Muslims and threatens them with war, drawing parallels with the war the ANZACs fought, paradoxically referring to it as a 'fight for our democratic lifestyle':

... We in Australia are very good at defending ourselves against child molesters, murderers and people whose culture it is to overtake our peaceful lifestyle and replace it with hate! We are not racist!!! It's your culture of barbaric brain washing we are against and we will fight tooth and nail to stop you and your crap becoming the norm in this country!!! You are in a war that you won't win!! We are good at it!! And thank God for our ANZACS and soldiers!! this may be a different war, but it is still a fight for our democratic lifestyle! One you seem to be enjoying very much! Because where you came from you would have been butchered for opening you mouth!

These calls for action against Muslims and the government resonate with what Johnson ([2005](#)) observed in the context of US mobilisation of widespread support for the post 9/11 War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq. America's 'organic civil religion' was instrumentalised for political purposes. While 'organic expressions of civil religion are based on lived practice' and tend to be open to different meaning-making, instrumental civil religion 'is composed of speeches and ceremonies calculated for political effect' (Johnson [2005](#), 303) and becomes 'a total system able to direct public opinion and mobilize group action in the public sphere' (304).

What the ANZACs did (not) fight for – guidance for today?

Australian soldiers, especially those who fought in World War I, are typically portrayed as noble and brave heroes.⁴ There is no room in far-right online spaces for criticism or doubt. This character depiction is much more than a historical judgement as it translates into an Anzac 'spirit' that is seen as defining an idealised Australian psyche and identity. Accordingly, 'good Australians' today have the same attributes that allegedly characterised the diggers more than a century earlier. 'The spirit of Anzac, with its qualities of courage, mateship, and sacrifice, continues to have meaning and relevance for our sense of national identity', one Facebook posts

reads, and another one claims that the 'Spirit of the ANZACS is STILL with Australians Today. Read the qualities of the digger is still the character of our Nation'. Calls on fellow Australians to reignite this 'spirit' and to continue the ANZACS' battle are common, but what did the ANZACS fight for, according to these far-right Facebook pages?

A frequently expressed view in the dataset is that the ANZACS fought and died for Australians' freedom, safety, and our 'way of life', the latter usually not being further specified. Drawing a direct link between past military actions and contemporary society, many state that the diggers sacrificed their lives for 'us Australians' to live in safety and freedom today. Numerous posts and comments claim that these democratic freedoms are now under threat, especially by an allegedly illiberal Islam as well as government failure and political inaction, as discussed above. The following quotes exemplify this prevalent sentiment in direct relation to what the ANZAC diggers fought for:

our great heroic ANZACS would be turning in their graves alot of them have died for NOTHING our way of life they fought so hard for will be gone forever politicians and do gooders this will be YOUR FAULT disgrace.

To our Diggers who gave their lives for us. And the Freedom Security and Rights they Died to give us, I ... thank you for all you have done for Australia. The up most respect to you from me is the least I could do. Unfortunately the times have not been Kind to all you fought for and Now we are in danger of becoming extinct. The Government and political System is stacked against us and time has seen changes that have weakened or removed most of your efforts and all your securities rights and Freedoms are becoming a thing of the past.

My father fought in the Gallipoli campaign to make it safe for us to live without fear, but our Pollies don't care about these men, Lest we forget them, If I have to do the same thing, it Will be without hesitation.

The association of Anzac with national safety and liberty, weaponised for a specific anti-Muslim and anti-government agenda, was prominent in our dataset, but we also identified more explicitly racist and homophobic messaging in the discussion of what Anzac represents. Here, the Anzac legend is utilised to advocate for an idealised Australia, which, in their view, is White and straight.

LGBT has no right and conducts itself in a selfish disrespectful act of the highest order towards those who have fallen in a time period where such social engineering towards gay rights were non existent. This is not preserving the Anzac Spirit & is a total disgrace! It must be removed immediately!

Many brave Australian diggers died fighting to protect their own people, their own heritage and their own nation. Sadly, in the year 2016 it seems that the ANZACS blood that was spilt was all in vain. Australia is becoming totally changed from an immigration invasion that is ruining this once great nation. Asianization is still happening unabated. Lest we forget those proud Australian diggers that gave their

lives for their country and for a White Australia ... The ANZACs would be rolling in their graves if they knew the multicultural/multiracial abomination their beloved nation has become.

Such Anzac references convey a nostalgic message of what Australia supposedly used to be like but is no more. This nostalgia is of a restorative rather than reflective type (Boym [2001](#)), 'driven by the desire to pristinely restore an idealised past' (Gaston and Hilhorst [2018](#), 33). It draws on a re-imagining of Australia's past, represented by the assumed qualities of the ANZACs, creating a utopian Australian society today and in the future. Taggart ([2004](#), 278) coined the term 'heartland' to refer to this 'construct of the good life derived retrospectively from a romanticized concept of life as it has been lived'. Ultimately, according to far-right online messaging, a return to the 'heartland' is what is worth fighting for. The following post is one of many that illustrates how Anzac is used to mobilise around the 'heartland': 'United we Can Get Our Country Back To The Way We Love & Cherish! Lets Make Our Anzacs Proud! Our Childrens Future Is What We Are Fighting For, Let The Next Generation Enjoy The Freedoms We Enjoyed'. The nostalgia that is evoked, nevertheless masks the radically anti-democratic ideas that sit at the heart of far-right extremism, while the tension between the anti-democratic message and the idea of freedom that the ANZACs fought for is largely unacknowledged.

Conclusion

The Anzac legend arguably constitutes Australia's most visible expression of civil religion, consistently evoked to express the claimed values of the nation and what it means to be Australian today. For many Australians, Anzac represents the Australian spirit and idealised character, one of mateship, sacrifice, irreverence and larrikinism. This offers a rather positive normative framework and typically shapes the symbolic message conveyed by the material practices at official Anzac Day commemorations. As we have argued, these commemorations constitute a manifestation of 'organic civil religion': they may be 'emotionally powerful' but carry 'little specifically political content' (Johnson [2005](#), 289) beyond the rather symbolic emphasis on basic democratic principles and a national identity that is not politically charged. In April 2017, then Prime Minister Turnbull captured these Australian values, emphasising that these are the values the ANZACs fought for in the past and continue to fight for in contemporary conflict zones: 'Freedom, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, mutual respect, equality, the opportunity to get ahead, the fair go – the opportunity to get ahead but lend a hand to those who fall behind' (Turnbull [2017](#)). Turnbull, like other Prime Ministers before him, clearly attempted to link Anzac commemoration with the celebration of an inclusive version of Australian identity and patriotism (Bromfield and Page [2020](#)).

The symbolism of Anzac Day as a central element of Australia's civil religion is, however, highly ambiguous and allows also more exclusivist interpretations (Fallon [2017](#)). Our analysis of posts and comments from 12 Australian far-right Facebook pages confirms this and demonstrates how the sacralisation of the Anzac legend (Seal [2007](#)), forged on the shores of Gallipoli during World War I, lends itself to being incorporated into a far-right agenda of exclusionary nationalism. Within these radical fringe spaces, Anzac gains a more explicit political meaning and discursive

functions as an 'instrumental civil religion' (Johnson [2005](#)). References to Anzac are used to articulate an exclusivist political version of a narrowly defined national identity and the imagined nation more broadly and to mobilise support for such a political agenda.

Anzac is a particular focus of worship within the far-right online environments; it is sacred as a symbol of the imagined and idealised Australian 'heartland' (Taggart [2004](#)). This means different things to different groups and individuals within the far-right milieu; two framings are particularly prominent in our empirical analysis.

First, the unconditional glorification of Anzac is typically used as a fundamental benchmark of acceptance in Australian society. This is articulated in different ways, ranging from more assimilationist versions of tolerance of minorities to racial exclusion, ethno-nationalism and the celebration of a White (and straight) Australia. Second, the ANZAC's deployment in Gallipoli is re-interpreted as a war against Islam, not dissimilar to the Crusades almost a millennium earlier. This historically inaccurate interpretation is extended to contemporary Australia, painting Muslims in Australia as the 'enemy within' and the archetypical antithesis to Australian values. The mere presence of Islam in the country is considered an affront to the diggers who died fighting for Australia's freedom and way of life. This argument is sometimes used to blame the government for allowing Muslim immigration and Islamic practices, conveying an anti-government agenda, which constitutes a key mobilisation theme within Australia's far-right (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal [2019](#)).

Our analysis illustrates how Anzac references have been used by far-right groups for a special political purpose and a tool to mobilise its supporters into taking actions. Johnson's ([2005](#)) differentiation between *organic* civil religion, manifest in the symbolic rituals of official Anzac commemorations, and *instrumental* civil religion, used to mobilise support and call for action by far-right groups, has been a helpful conceptual framework for our analysis and it may prove useful for future research in this area. The interpretative ambiguity of Anzac as part of Australia's civil religion (Thomson [2013](#), 312) offers an empty vessel to deliver different and even contradictory political messages (Bromfield [2017](#), 296). Not dissimilar to the improvised altars on Ground Zero in New York after the 9/11 terror attacks, the state-sanctioned public Anzac commemorations remain mute to the mobilisation and at times instrumentalisation by far-right groups for their exclusivist political agenda.

Our findings highlight not only the diversity of framings of Anzac *within* the far-right milieu (e.g. cultural-assimilationist vs. racial-exclusivist framings), but also point to the slippery interpretative continuum that does not always have clear boundaries between the mainstream and the far-right. References to Anzac within the analysed dataset of far-right fringe actors bear significant resemblance with the way broader segments of Australian society perceive Anzac. There have been many convergences: As part of Australia's civil religion, the Anzac legend is sacred – for people within the far-right but also for many Australians who do not share far-right ideologies. There is also a significant overlap between mainstream interpretations and framings within far-right groups that the ANZACs put their lives on the line to fight for the freedom Australians enjoy today. Many far-right Facebook posts convey a message that strongly resonates with Turnbull's

(2017) elaborations: ‘As Anzac Day approaches, we remember and honour the sacrifices that have kept us free. A high price indeed paid for our freedom, paid in young lives lost far from home.’

Another thematic convergence is that, while war itself is rarely glorified, the ANZACs and their actions and behaviour usually are. This includes references to their courage, selfless sacrifice and endurance, mateship and noble human spirit, which occur frequently in far-right depictions but also in political speech of mainstream political leaders (Bromfield 2018). Any critical commentary that challenges this image is frequently sanctioned, also by representative of the political mainstream. The outrage over Yassmin Abdel-Magied’s ANZAC post in 2017, for example, was not limited to far-right groups but was also expressed in various mainstream media outlets and by a number of Conservative politicians, including ministers and senators (Ackland 2017). For many the Anzac legend is beyond historical scrutiny – also in significant segments of Australian society and polity. These insights into the discursive convergences between the radical right fringes and centrist segments of society make a significant evidence-based contribution to the commonly articulated, but less often empirically backed claims of mainstreaming of far-right narratives.

The meaning of Anzac remains a topic of ongoing contestation, and this contestation reflects the dynamism and continuous evolution of the interpretation of Australia’s civil religion and national identity. Nostalgic re-imagination of the ‘heartland’ fails to acknowledge this fluidity. What kind of society and nation did the diggers fight for in 1915, at a time when Aboriginal peoples were still considered sub-human in the Constitution, when White supremacy was institutionalised through the White Australia Policy and when homosexuality would remain criminalised for at least another 60 years? One hundred years later, Australian troops in Afghanistan surely do not fight for the same society, and ‘freedom’ means something different in 2020 than it did in 1915. As society progresses, the meaning of its national symbols, including Anzac, evolves. Such a time and context specific, fluid interpretation of Anzac collides with the static ideological mindset within Australia’s far-right but it also challenges Australian society as a whole in its struggle to come to terms with the question as to what ‘being Australian’ means today.

Notes

1 Scholars such as McDonald (2010) and Flanagan (2018) have argued that then Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, subtly invoked the Anzac legend to justify Australia’s active military engagement in the US-led War on Terror after 9/11.

2 Selected findings of a comprehensive analysis of this large data set were published in XXX [anonymized].

3 ‘Diggers’ is a commonly used slang term that refers to Australian soldiers.

4 While some posts convey an image of diggers as White men, others refer to the ANZACs as ‘our servicemen and women’ and some even acknowledge the involvement of Aboriginal soldiers in the ANZAC.

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