

MARION MADDOX

bringing
indigenous religion
into focus

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*Aboriginal Religions in Australia:
An Anthology of Recent Writings*

Ashgate, London, 2005

ISBN 0754651282

RRP US \$99.95 (hb)

I'm not usually a fan of reprint anthologies—particularly when many of the contributions are sliced out of larger works. When the material is already available in full, why would anyone with access to a university library pay for a volume of excerpts? *Aboriginal Religions in Australia* defies such objections.

For sound anthropological reasons, discussion of religion is often embedded in broader works in Indigenous cultures. As Ronald Berndt noted, 'Aboriginal religion in its mytho-ritual expression was intimately associated with everyday social living, with relations between the sexes, with the natural environment and with food collecting'.¹ In a sense, separating out 'religion' from other aspects of life creates an artificial division reflecting the particular patterns of European, Christian-based societies. The price of achieving analytical clarity for Western readers may include misrepresenting worldviews to which the very idea of a division between religious and secular is problematic. So it might be argued that a compilation such as this, which incorporates snippets from book-length ethnographies, reprinted articles and interventions in ongoing controversies, risks perpetuating false divisions.

The flip side, though, is that lack of focused attention on religion per se often reflects assumptions no less problematic than the over-specificity against which Berndt implicitly warns. For one thing, the secular orientation or even anti-religion Enlightenment prejudice of Western, post-Christian observers can be said to have encouraged a certain 'religion-blind' stance. Robert Tonkinson, one of the contributors to *Aboriginal Religions*, has elsewhere

reflected helpfully on the ways in which an anthropologist's own religious persuasions, regrets or embarrassments become part of the fieldwork experience.² Nonie Sharp's study of the processes that eventually resulted in the Native Title decision makes the point that the often close relationship between anthropology and land claims adds another incentive for anthropologists to play down the specifically religious nature of traditions which must one day stand their ground in self-consciously secular courts or tribunals.³

There are also less admirable reasons why a book-length focus on Indigenous religion remains rare. As W.E.H. Stanner points out, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnographers who so assiduously documented many areas of Aboriginal culture often neglected to pay attention to religion, or did so under dismissive or minimising categories (such as magic). Through much of the nineteenth century, he maintains, anthropology was blinkered by the view that Indigenous peoples were either 'too archaic in the social sense or too debased in the moral sense to have veritable religion'.⁴ That view gradually faded in the twentieth century, but without greatly improving the prospects for understanding Indigenous religion. According to Stanner, Durkheim and Freud became the ascendant voices in academic understanding of religion, and each painted religion as a factor of, or code for, something else. For Durkheim, the 'something else' was society; for Freud, the 'something else' was (variously) the unconscious, repressed traumatic history from our distant evolutionary past, lost memories of infant bliss or unresolved oedipal anxieties. As

a result of this scholarly displacement, no sooner had the academic world discovered Indigenous religion than 'many a writer about the Aborigines dropped the word "religion" altogether'.⁵

I would be tempted to think that this aspect of Stanner's 'great Australian silence' was finally wearing down, were it not for the salutary experience of interviewing Australian politicians for my first book. While many interviewees expressed respect for Indigenous religious tradition and recognised the need for government to protect sacred sites and customs, others seemed genuinely bemused by the thought of according Indigenous religion the same status as other faith traditions. Alexander Downer went to the length of pulling a dictionary off the shelf, reading out the definition of religion, and hazarding, 'It might be drawing a long bow, actually, to define sacred sites as religious ... they [Indigenous Australians] don't have a religion ... I suppose I've never really contemplated that this [sacred site protection] was a matter ... of religion'.⁶

Clearly, the academic world has moved a lot further than Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister; but the fact that such attitudes are still acceptable at the highest levels of government indicates that there remains a long way to go in bringing understanding and appreciation of Indigenous religion into the mainstream.

Of specific studies of Indigenous religion, some are concerned less with understanding the internal meaning and dynamics of particular traditions than with illustrating a broader historical or philosophical point, sometimes relying in the process on a fairly high level of speculation. Lynne Hume's *Ancestral Power: The*

*Dreaming, Consciousness and Aboriginal Australians*⁷ seeks an understanding of spiritual power through comparing ethnographic accounts of the Dreaming with cross-cultural instances of altered states of consciousness; Tony Swain's *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*⁸ hypothesises a pre-contact, pan-Aboriginal spirituality concerned with philosophy of place, and uninterested in time; and David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* finds potential healing for non-Aboriginal Australian spiritual malaise in a Jungian connection with white Australia's Aboriginal archetype.⁹

The contributors to *Aboriginal Religions in Australia* come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, but the focus remains closely on the lived experience of particular Indigenous communities in particular circumstances. Steering away from speculative abstraction, the contributors ask, from numerous angles, what it is like to be religious in the various distinctive ways characteristic of the various communities. The book fills out a field in which the distinguished philosopher Max Charlesworth already looms large. His 1998 anthology was *Religious Business*, a collection of lectures originally sponsored by the Charles Strong Memorial Trust (one of which, by Frank Brennan, reappears in *Aboriginal Religions in Australia*). In 1984 he co-edited *Religion in Aboriginal Australia* with Howard Morphy, Diane Bell and Kenneth Maddock.

The contributions to this latest volume span a significant period—Peter Sutton's 'Myth and History' first appeared in 1988, Ian Keen's discussion of Stanner in 1985 and John Mulvaney's

piece on Spencer and Gillen is excerpted from a co-authored publication of 1985. These classic discussions are helpful to have in the new volume, in some cases excerpted for a specific focus on religion. For other contributions, the effluxion of time is more problematic, particularly when they refer to issues which remain dynamic. For example, even if it is unreasonable to complain that Robert Tonkinson's 1997 discussion of the role of anthropology and the nature of tradition in the Hindmarsh Island affair takes no account of Diane Bell's 1998 *Ngarrindjeri Wurrurwarin* (an excerpt of which is also included, though in a separate section from Tonkinson's), it is jarring to read in the 2005 book Tonkinson's prediction that the Hindmarsh Island Bridge, four years old at the time of publication, 'may soon be built'. (251)

The book is arranged thematically. The section covering 'Revaluations' includes major figures rethinking longstanding concepts or examining classical works: Mulvaney on Spencer and Gillen, Hiatt on High Gods and Keen on Stanner. 'Religious Business' in fact focuses exclusively on women's activities, Howard Morphy's introduction pointing out that the volume elsewhere contains plenty on men. Diane Bell's excerpt considers anthropological blindness to women's ritual activity, stemming from a more general blindness to women; and Françoise Dussart takes a biographical approach to demonstrate how a senior 'businesswoman' gains her expertise and authority.

If those schooled in the secular academy can incline to religion-blindness, other biases can intrude once religion is taken into the picture.

In particular, the text-focus of Western religious traditions can lead some observers to downplay material, as opposed to verbal, components of other religious traditions. The section on 'Art and Religion' in this collection guards against such criticisms, even as the 'and' in the heading draws attention to the problematic separation to which analysts of Indigenous art regularly point. As Morphy declares early in his piece, 'From a Yolngu perspective paintings are not so much a means of representing the ancestral past as one dimension of the ancestral past ... In a society in which ancestral creativity underlies everything, ancestral creations inevitably become part of the way other things are defined' (159–60). Two essays (Myers and Green) focus on the work of a single artist. Morphy places the work of two artists, father and daughter, in the context of a discussion about the changing relationships between men and women, insider and outsider status and the place of art not only in religious life.

As Hindmarsh Island and Coronation Hill, among other instances, have demonstrated, continuity and innovation in Indigenous tradition are far from being issues of merely academic interest. Livelihoods, lifeways and even lives can be swept away in the controversies that erupt around the suggestion of novelty, which may or may not equate to a charge of 'fabrication'. It is no surprise, then, that innovation surfaces repeatedly through the volume.

It is directly addressed in the section 'Sacred Places'. Francesca Merlan starts from a straightforward question—'Do Places Appear?'—and a site with apparently novel significance, to tease out what are the important issues in such cases.

She argues for an orientation which neither 'assume[s] rampant constructionism as a fundamental approach' nor 'demand[s] evidence of complete fixity of meaning'. Instead, she points to the importance of efforts to 'clarify the processes in which meaning is produced, changed, and transmitted'. In relation to the particular site which is the focus of her study, she maintains that 'All the evidence I have ... points to this object having been unknown to Katherine Aborigines' until its apparently casual discovery by one individual. However, 'this newness does not preclude Aboriginal people's envisioning the process by which it became known as one characterized by continuity ... The thing was already there, with its own presence and meaning'. (124) Marcia Langton explores many layers of the Papunya Tula painting style's emergence in the international art market in the early 1970s. To urban Australian buyers and critics, the paintings impressed the 'shock of the ancient' upon pre-Whitlamite art audiences 'tired of modernism and bored with pop art'. To the painters themselves, the paintings gave visual expression to 'the intensity and vibrancy of the artists' longing for homeland, the agony of their exile and the joy of returning' which found political expression in the 1970s return to homelands. (137)

The two decades between its first publication and inclusion in the collection give a particular edge to Peter Sutton's contribution, about the various roles played by different interpretations of myth and history in both non-Aboriginal academic work and urban Aboriginal scholars' own identity formation. Ten years of 'practical reconciliation' and

government antipathy to ‘multiculturalism’ have made it harder for discussions of anything resembling identity politics to seem relevant to anything beyond the arcane preoccupations of the academy. Yet, as Sutton points out, the question about who gets to define history and myth ‘is importantly a question of competition for control of the construction of information about Aboriginal culture in the public domain in Australian society’. (152) In the light of the ‘history wars’ of recent years, in which the very idea of admitting an Aboriginal point of view in Australian history at all has begun to look increasingly questionable in some quarters, it is hard to avoid the feeling that many of the issues which generated such heat in the 1980s may have to be worked through all over again.

One of the strengths of the volume is its presentation of varied perspectives—not in the sense of competing interpretations so much as in providing a range of approaches which, together, fill out a picture. So, the section collectively called ‘Different Dreamings’ includes David Mowaljarlai’s description of Kimberley creation narratives as well as a beautiful account by Deborah Bird Rose of the relationship between parts and whole in Yarralin philosophy in which the relationship between insider and outsider accounts is as much a part of her story as the internal dynamics of the system she is describing. An excerpt from John Morton’s ‘Aboriginal Religion Today’ enlighteningly contrasts three different Aboriginal voices speaking about their religious identity. They represent not only different generations and life experiences but also different views of ‘Dreaming’—as highly

specific and related to particular country and people; or as a more generalised ‘singular spiritual essence belonging to all Aboriginal people and connecting them to one Aboriginal country’ (200); or as one part of a system which offers redemption and reconciliation achieved ‘partly in a religion that had been introduced by invaders and partly in a uniquely Aboriginal way of life’. (202) A less-noted feature of controversies such as Hindmarsh Island and Coronation Hill was the tendency of much media coverage and public commentary to set up a sharp division between followers of traditional Law and those who had converted to Christianity. Morton’s piece points out the futility of such attempts, as well as the violence that they do to the ‘many thousands of Aboriginal Christians’. Morton proposes that ‘the genius of Aboriginal religion ... in its capacity to reconcile believers to unity and harmony without denying the forces which create divisions,’ and even that it might point to a world in which ‘Indigenous and other Australians can possess their own stories, yet recognise the potential of each other’s Dreamings within the scope and principles of a more general Law’.

Fiona McGowan demonstrates how variations in Christian theology and liturgical practice facilitate a wide range of Indigenous ways of negotiating these issues within a single community. Yolngu Christianity covers a wide spectrum, from those who reject traditional stories and practices to the ‘Aboriginal theology’ of people like Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra who interpret their Christian faith in terms of Yolngu tradition. As Gondarra puts it:

The Reformation gave Western culture the freedom to explore the dialogue between Gospel and Culture in many directions. The Western Church has not, in turn, given that same freedom to Aboriginal people to explore that dialogue through their own culture. We now want to, and must explore that dialogue. (292)

The former position is facilitated by a Christocentric theology in which Jesus figures as overcoming the fear of ancestral places and prohibitions, and is expressed through American-influenced songs in English. The latter appeals to a theocentric concentration on God as the source of Yolngu tradition, and is expressed through liturgical forms which draw on traditional dance and song.

Nor is Christianity the only imported tradition which Indigenous religion must negotiate. The Macassan trepang traders who visited from the early eighteenth century until 1907 brought more than new technologies and unfamiliar trade goods to South-East Arnhem Land. Ian MacIntosh describes a mortuary ritual, *Wurramu*, which relates to a figure variously called Walitha'walitha, Alatha'alatha or Allah. Originally charting the tensions between Macassan traders and their Indigenous hosts, the ritual has more recently come to be understood as a celebration of a historical partnership, interpreted now in the context of the relationship with the more recently arrived European 'Others'.

The diversity of material inevitably means that some questions are raised but not

answered. MacIntosh's contribution documents Yolngu negotiations about the meaning of their Allah traditions during a period of preparation for a 1996 performance of *Wurramu* in Indonesia, its first performance outside Australia. MacIntosh could speculate on, but not yet report, the outcome of those negotiations.

While tantalising and occasionally frustrating, there is also a sense in which that is right and proper for an anthology such as this. When we need to know detail, we can seek out subsequent publications or the full work from which a contribution has been extracted. While sometimes contributions seem a little disjointed without their original context, this volume gives them a new one, which enables them to form part of a conversation where much more remains to be said. I hope Alexander Downer reads it.

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1. Ronald M. Berndt, 'A Profile of Good and Bad in Australian Aboriginal Religion', in Max Charlesworth (ed.), *Religious Business: Essays on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, pp. 24–45, at p. 28.
 2. Robert Tonkinson, 'Reflections on a Failed Crusade' in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic*

and Historical Studies, Australian Association for the Study of Religions (Special Studies in Religions no. 6), Adelaide, 1988, pp. 60–73. See also Tonkinson, ‘Scriptural Prescription, Social Reality: Reflections on Religious Dynamism’, Second Berndt Memorial Lecture, 31 October 2002, University of Western Australia.

3. Nonie Sharpe, *No Ordinary Judgment*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1996.
4. W.E.H. Stanner, ‘Religion, Totemism and Symbolism’ in R. Berndt and C. Berndt (eds), *Aboriginal Man in Australia: Essays in Honour of Emeritus Professor A.P. Elkin*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, pp. 207–37.
5. Stanner, ‘Religion, Totemism and Symbolism’.
6. Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2001, pp. 274–75.
7. Melbourne University Press, 2002.
8. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
9. HarperCollins, Melbourne, 1995.