

“Melodies from the Beyond” Australian Aboriginal Religion in Schuonian Perspective

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“In all epochs and all countries there have been revelations, wisdoms, religions: tradition is a part of mankind, just as man is part of tradition.” (Frithjof Schuon)¹

Frithjof Schuon’s *oeuvre* comprises a peerless explication of the *sophia perennis* which informs all integral traditions, including those of primordial origin. His writings, along with those of René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, have fulfilled a providential function by answering to certain spiritual necessities arising from the peculiar cyclic conditions of the time.² Schuon’s understanding of different spiritual universes and his ability to penetrate religious forms is of a more or miraculous order. Amongst his most poignant writings are those on the American Plains Indians, many of which were gathered together in *The Feathered Sun* (1990), accompanied by reproductions of Schuon’s luminous paintings on Indian themes. The metaphysical and cosmological doctrines of the Indians, the symbolic language of their myths, rituals and art, the arcane practices of shamanism, and many other aspects of their religious life are elucidated with the clarity, profundity and beauty which characterise all of Schuon’s work. His writings on the religious heritage of the Indians provide us with an exemplary account of a mythologically-based spiritual economy. What follows is an application of the principles so magisterially expounded by Schuon to an understanding of a particular spiritual heritage, that of the Australian Aborigines.



¹ Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1965, p. 125.

² See Harry Oldmeadow, “A Sage for the Times: The Role and *Oeuvre* of Frithjof Schuon”, *Sophia* 4:2, 1998, pp. 56-77.

Background

Since the arrival of the Europeans, late in the eighteenth century, Australia's indigenous inhabitants have been the subject of feelings ranging from a sentimental romanticism to deep hostility and contempt. The Aborigine has been cast in various roles: the “Noble Savage”; a harmless and infantile figure of fun; an embodiment of all that is morally repugnant in man's nature; an anthropological relic of the Stone Age; a biological curio; a victim of a divine curse; a social misfit incapable of living a responsible and productive life. The stereotypes have changed under the pressure of new circumstances and the shifting ideological presuppositions of the observers but throughout them all runs the persistent European failure to understand Aboriginal culture, in particular that network of beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships and patterned behaviours which we can loosely assemble under the canopy of “Aboriginal religion”. The factors which have shaped European attitudes are precisely those which have fuelled the ongoing cultural vandalism of modern, industrial societies against indigenous cultures across the globe. To name a few: ignorance about the culture in question; ideas about the cultural superiority of modern, industrial civilisation, often buttressed by evolutionism of both a biological and social kind; the claims of an aggressive Christian exclusivism, operating as an accomplice to European colonialism; the inadequacies of the conceptual apparatus brought to the study of “primitive” cultures.

The attitude to Aboriginal religion of most European observers has been “a melancholy mixture of neglect, condescension and misunderstanding”.³ From the outset there has been a tenacious, often wilful, refusal to acknowledge that the Aborigines had any religion at all. In 1798, for instance, an early colonist wrote:

It has been asserted by an eminent divine, that no country has yet been discovered where some trace of religion was not to be found. From every observation and inquiry that I could make among these people, from the first to the last of my acquaintance with them, I can safely pronounce them an exception to this opinion. ⁴

³ Max Charlesworth: *Religion in Aboriginal Australia* ed M. Charlesworth et al., St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984, p. 1.

⁴ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, 1798, quoted in W.E.H. Stanner, “Religion, totemism and symbolism” in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 138. Such a view is echoed in the words of an otherwise sympathetic missionary, writing in the mid-19th century: “The Aborigines of New Holland, in this part of the Colony, have no priesthood, no altar, no sacrifice, nor any religious service, strictly so-called; their superstitious observances can scarcely be designated as divine

The recognition that the Aborigines had a vibrant spiritual life and an ongoing tradition came slowly and was never more than partial. Such nineteenth-century scholarship as there was concerning Aboriginal religion often rested on rotten foundations, namely, those vague but potent Victorian prejudices and cultural valuations which assumed the biological and cultural superiority of the white man, the belief that British institutions marked the apotheosis of civilisation, and the notion that the extinction of the indigenous peoples of Australia was not only inevitable but divinely appointed.⁵ Notions of cultural superiority had a long and sordid pedigree in Europe, refurbished by evolutionism in both its scientific and sociological guises. The global decline of the darker races was a theme which enjoyed widespread currency in the Victorian era. Thus a late 19th century writer:

It seems a law of nature where two races whose stages of progression differ greatly are brought into contact, the inferior race is doomed to disappear...The process seems to be in accordance with a natural law which...is clearly beneficial to mankind at large by providing for the survival of the fittest. Human progress has all been achieved by the spread of the progressive race and the squeezing out of the inferior ones...It may be doubted that the Australian aborigine would ever have advanced much beyond the status of the neolithic races...we need not therefore lament his disappearance.⁶

A militant Christian evangelism helped to erode the early Romantic image of the Noble Savage which had been derived, in large part, from the writings of Rousseau. (We should note in passing Schuon’s remark that although the Noble Savage motif was no doubt largely sentimental, it was not drawn entirely “out of thin air”.⁷) With widespread missionizing activity in Australia and the Pacific came a reaction against romantic primitivism: to churchmen of evangelical persuasion it was less than proper that “pagan savages” should be idealized as either noble or innocent.⁸ The theme of the Aborigines’

rites being only mysterious works of darkness, revellings and suchlike.” L.E. Threlkeld, quoted in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 2.

⁵ See the historical survey of European attitudes in Tony Swain, *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion*, Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1985.

⁶ *The Age* January 11th, 1889, quoted in Henry Reynolds (ed), *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, p. 9.

⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1990, p. 77.

⁸ The role of Christian missionaries and their impact on Aboriginal culture is an extremely complex one which has been vastly oversimplified by apologists on both sides of the fence. It would certainly be misleading to suggest that the role of the missionaries was entirely destructive. In some areas the missionaries were instrumental in providing a refuge in which Aboriginal people were able to survive physically and in which at least some remnants of traditional culture were preserved. Nonetheless, a good

moral abasement was in vogue by mid-century and all manner of pseudo-Biblical rationales were invoked to legitimate racist and self-interested prejudices.

The story of how the whites made the Aborigines exiles in their own land is, to say the least, a dismal one. The introduction of European diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza and syphilis, the appropriation of Aboriginal hunting grounds, the spreading of malign influences such as alcohol and gunpowder, the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, brutal physical violence escalating into a program of genocidal extermination in parts of the continent,⁹ institutionalized racial discrimination ranging from a well-intentioned paternalism to programs of vicious repression, the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, and governmental policies of “assimilation” and “integration” all played a significant role in this tragic story.¹⁰ More crucial perhaps than any of these deprivations has been the desecration of sacred sites without which Aboriginal religious life cannot survive.

Recent anthropologists have certainly abandoned many of the cruder racist assumptions of their predecessors but all too often have succeeded only in replacing Victorian prejudices with those more characteristic of our own age whilst still retaining a childish faith in the capacity of a rationalistic and materialistic pseudo-science to grasp the mysteries of a complex spiritual tradition. Nothing more dramatically betokens the failure of Durkheimian anthropology than its continuing insistence that Aboriginal “religion” is, essentially, a system for legitimizing certain social functions and relationships. Not for nothing has Mircea Eliade written of the “religious illiteracy” of so many scholars of so-called “primitive” religious traditions.¹¹ Whilst intellectual fashions amongst ethnologists and anthropologists have changed over the last two hundred years the one constant factor has been an intransigent reductionism which refuses to treat Aboriginal religion in its own terms or, indeed, in terms appropriate to any religious

deal of evil was perpetrated in the name of Christianity. For a balanced discussion of this issue see Monica Furlong, *The Flight of the Kingfisher*, London, Harper Collins, 1996, esp. Ch 4.

⁹ As late as 1902 white commentators were still justifying the deliberate killing of Aborigines in terms such as these: “The substitution of more than a million of industrious and peaceful people for a roaming, fighting contingent of six thousand cannot be said to be dearly purchased even at the cost of the violent deaths of a fraction of the most aggressive among them.” H.A. Turner, *History of the Colony of Victoria* Vol 1, London, 1902, p.239, quoted in *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders*, p. 9.

¹⁰ As well as the work by Reynolds already cited see Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1982, and C.D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1972.

tradition. The theories of Freud, Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl, for instance, are all variations on the reductionist theme.¹² Furthermore, as Whitall Perry once observed, “...the scientific pursuit of religion puts the saddle on the wrong horse, since it is the domain of religion to evaluate science, and not vice versa.”¹³ Nothing so characterizes the mentality of modernism as the naive belief that the greater can be contained in the lesser, which is precisely the impossibility attempted when a profane scholarship, immune to anything of a spiritual order, tries to force a living spiritual tradition into the sterile categories of a quasi-scientific reductionism—no matter whether the reductionism in question be Durkheimian, Freudian, or Marxist! In the words of W.E.H. Stanner,

It is preposterous that something like a century of study, because of rationalism, positivism and materialism, should have produced two options: that Aboriginal religion is either (to follow Durkheim) what someone called “the mirage of society” or (to follow Freud) the neurosis of society.¹⁴

Such a situation should alert us to the dangers and impostures of modernism in its many different “scholarly” guises. Furthermore, from a religious viewpoint, we cannot too often recall Schuon’s reminder that, “it is the spiritual, not the temporal, which culturally, socially and politically is the criterion of all other values.”¹⁵



Aboriginal Culture

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971, pp. xiii-xiv.

¹² See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, and Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, p. xvii.

¹³ Whitall Perry, Review of Ninian Smart’s *The Phenomena of Religion* in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 7:2, 1973, p. 127.

¹⁴ W. E. H. Stanner, “Religion, totemism and symbolism”, in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 155. One must, in fairness, concede that anthropology has produced some imaginative, sensitive and sympathetic scholars who have alerted us to the many misdemeanours of their predecessors and who have helped to foster a more respectful approach which tries to understand Aboriginal religion in its own terms. The late Professor Stanner, for instance, insisted that Aboriginal religion must be studied “as religion and not as the mirror of something else” and strenuously refuted the fallacy that “the social order is primary and in some sense causal, and the religious order secondary and in some sense consequential”. (W.E.H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion*, Oceania Monograph No 11, Sydney, 1963, quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, pp. 196-197. See also W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming, Essays 1938-1973*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979.)

¹⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995, p. 28.

In terms of its socio-economic organisation Aboriginal culture can be described, over most of the continent, as a hunter-gatherer society in which tribal members were highly mobile within clearly understood geographical boundaries, and in which the social dynamics were governed by complex kinship and totemic systems, and by principles of reciprocity and exchange. The web of beliefs and practices, which might loosely be labelled “religious”, is best described as mythologically-based and embedded in a ritual-ceremonial complex centering on a sacramental relationship with the land itself.¹⁶ Aboriginal religion can also be described as “primal” which is to say that it is prehistoric in origin, non-literate, tribal, and one in which the distinction between “religion” and “culture” at large has no meaning.¹⁷ The qualities which Hilton Deakin has identified as characteristic of primal cultures apply specifically to Aboriginal society: such cultures are ethnocentric, non-universal, non-missionizing; they are intimately related to the natural world by a perceived spiritual kinship; they emphasize the existence of supernatural powers which are accessible to the human world; and they experience the world as saturated with spiritual power.¹⁸ Schuon’s words concerning the American Indians apply equally well to the Aborigines:

The Indian is predisposed towards the suprasensible and strives to penetrate the hard wall of the sensible world, seeks openings where he can, and finds them chiefly in phenomena themselves, which indeed, in their contents, are nothing other than signposts to the suprasensible. Things are hard-frozen melodies from the Beyond.¹⁹

Such cultures are also governed by sacred mythic accounts which leave them indifferent to the linear and chronological conception of history as it is understood in the modern West.²⁰ Of course, we here use “myth” not in its pejorative modern sense of a meaningless fabrication but rather in its perennial sense as a narrative account carrying metaphysical and spiritual messages. Recall Ananda Coomaraswamy words:

The myth (he wrote) is the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection. The mythical narrative is of timeless and placeless validity, true nowhere and

¹⁶ If it be asked what is meant by the term “sacramental” one can hardly do better than the traditional Christian formulation that a sacrament is “an outer and visible sign of an inner and invisible grace”.

¹⁷ See Max Charlesworth, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁸ See Hilton Deakin, “Some thoughts on transcendence in tribal societies” in *Ways of Transcendence*, ed Edwin Dowdy, Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1982, pp. 95-109.

¹⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, p. 154.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, pp. xvff.

everywhere...Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words.²¹

The Aboriginal worldview is also underpinned by a “visionary geography” which constitutes an ordered and meaningful world and, indeed, which situates both the community and individual in relation to the whole cosmos.²²



The Religious Heritage

Let us turn to several highly significant and suggestive manifestations of the Aboriginal religious heritage: the central conception of the Dreaming; beliefs about transcendental powers and the soul; the metaphysics of their sacred geography; the role of the *karadji*, or “medicine man”. The Dreaming is a “plurivocal term with a number of distinct though connected meanings”, expressed variously as *altjiranga*, *wongar*, and *bugari*.

First, it is a narrative mythical account of the foundation and shaping of the entire world by the ancestor heroes who are uncreated and eternal. Second, “the Dreaming” refers to the embodiment of the spiritual power of the ancestor heroes in the land in certain sites, and in species of fauna and flora, so that this power is available to people today. Indeed, one might say that for the Aboriginal his land is a kind of religious icon, since it both represents the power of the Dreamtime beings and also effects and transmits that power. Third, “the Dreaming” denotes the general way of life or “Law”—moral and social precepts, ritual and ceremonial practices, etc—based upon these mythical foundations. Fourth, “the Dreaming” may refer to the personal “way” or vocation that an individual Aboriginal might have by virtue of his membership of a clan, or by virtue of his spirit conception relating him to particular sites.²³

The Dreaming is an ever-present reality, not only “a long-past period in a time when life filled the void. It is rather the ever-present, unseen, ground of being—of existence”. As A.P. Elkin has also said, “The concept is not of a ‘horizontal’ line extending back chronologically through a series of pasts, but rather a ‘vertical’ line in which the past underlies and is within the present.”²⁴ The landscape as a whole, particular sites, objects, myths, and rituals, and human groups and individuals are all inter-related within the Dreaming which is “... the most real and concrete and fundamental aspect of Aboriginal

²¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995, p. 6.

²² On this general subject see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959. (The phrase “visionary geography” is Henri Corbin’s.)

²³ Max Charlesworth, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 10.

life and has nothing to do with the Western concept of dreaming as an imaginary, fantastic and illusory state of consciousness”.²⁵

All of the cardinal features of Aboriginal society are derived from the Dreaming:

The most momentous communication is the plan of life itself, the all-encompassing scope of which is shown in the shapes of the landscape, the events narrated in myth, the acts performed in rites, the codes observed in conduct, and the habits and characteristics of other forms of life.²⁶

We find here a feature characteristic of all religions: the notion of a Revelation of supra-human origins which lays down the “will of heaven”, and which invites but does not compel conformity to its dictates. As a recent anthropologist has noted,

The way in which the plan was “passed on” to humans as the powers withdrew above or below the earth is left obscure... but at least it is certain that men are not constrained to fidelity by their nature. The Aborigines know that they can fall away from what their traditional culture requires...²⁷

This is to say that they were no strangers to that fundamental freedom which constitutes the human estate, its dignity and its most terrible responsibility. The Dreaming constitutes a revealed mythology whilst the ongoing ritual and ceremonial life can be seen as the cord which joins Aboriginal society to its supernatural origins. Indeed, as Lord Northbourne observed, “Tradition, in the rightful sense of the word, is the chain that joins civilisation to Revelation.”²⁸ Or again, tradition might also usefully be thought of as “the mediator between time and eternity”. Each of these definitions is perfectly apposite in the Aboriginal context.

²⁴ A.P. Elkin quoted in Max Charlesworth, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 10.

²⁵ Max Charlesworth, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, p. 11. See also Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, pp. 1-3

²⁶ Kenneth Maddock, “The World Creative Powers” in Max Charlesworth, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 86-87

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Lord Northbourne, *Religion in the Modern World*, London: J.M. Dent, 1963, p. 34. In this context we might also recall Marco Pallis’s definition of tradition as “an effective communication of principles of more-than-human origin... through use of forms that will have arisen by applying those principles to contingent needs.” Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain* London: Peter Owen, 1960, p. 203.

The transcendental, world-creative power is known under a variety of names (*Baiame, Bunjil, Daramulan, Nurelli, Mangela*) and is anthropomorphic, masculine, creative, sky-dwelling, ethical, and paternally related to all of humankind—perhaps best translated in English as the “All-Father”. This Deity is immutable and eternal, existing before all things. Indeed, the belief in the divinity who created both man and the world and then ascended into heaven after bestowing on humankind the rudiments of culture, “is attested in many other archaic cultures”.²⁹ The same kind of transcendent, world-creative power is portrayed in some tribes, particularly those of Northern Australia, as feminine—the “All-Mother”.³⁰ Between the supreme being and more parochial and so-called “totemic” spirits and powers are supernatural beings, “sky heroes”, with whom much of the mythology is concerned. The Rainbow Serpent, representing the generative force, is one of the most widespread of such figures.³¹

As to the Aboriginal relationship with the natural world, what Joseph Epes Brown has said of the American Indians is also, in large measure, true of the Australian Aborigines:

...the world of nature was their temple, and within this sanctuary they showed great respect to every form, function and power. That the Indians held as sacred all the natural forms around them is not unique...But what is almost unique in the Indians’ attitude is that their reverence for life and nature is *central* to their religion: each form in the world around them bears such a host of precise values and meanings that taken altogether they constitute what one would call their “doctrine”.³²

It is not too much to say that for the Aborigines, as for the Indians, not only is nature their temple but also their Scripture. In the case of the Aborigines we have already seen how a mythic and sacred geography is derived from the Dreaming itself. Indeed, “in the end, the land is no more than a bridge between [them] and the sacred realm of the Dreaming”.³³

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, p. 7. The early ethnologists, especially those of an evolutionist bent, were unable to grasp the possibility of any religious conception amongst the Aborigines which might be comparable to the belief in a supreme, benevolent and ethical Deity such as was to be found in the great Occidental monotheisms; it ran counter to their assumptions about the intellectual and spiritual inferiority of the Aborigines. Nevertheless, as Eliade has remarked, “There is no doubt that the belief in such a celestial Supreme Being belongs among the most archaic and genuine traditions of the southeastern Aborigines.” The ethnologists likewise had difficulty in coming to terms with Aboriginal notions about the pre-existent and eternal soul in which most tribes believed. Again, Eliade has emphasized that “the indestructibility of the human spirit seems to be a fundamental and pan-Australian conception.” (p. 172)

³⁰ Kenneth Maddock, “The World Creative Powers”, pp. 88-92.

³¹ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, pp. 79ff.

³² Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indians*, New York: Crossroad, 1972, p. 37.

³³ James Cowan, “The Dream Journey: Ritual Renewal among Australian Aborigines”, *Temenos* 7, p.181

Much of their sacred art was directed towards the preservation of the tribal knowledge of that mythic geography. It is also worth remembering a point frequently stressed by Eliade: for *homo religiosus*, who is also necessarily *homo symbolicus*, everything in nature is capable of revealing itself as a “cosmic sacrality”, as a hierophany, in contrast to the profane outlook of modern man, an outlook which makes the universe “opaque, inert, mute”, a swirling chaos of dead matter.³⁴

The Aborigines’ semi-nomadic lifestyle ensured that they remained immersed in the realm of nature. It is as well to remember that such a relationship, of itself, confers spiritual gifts. As Frithjof Schuon so eloquently put it,

Virgin Nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness; she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty. It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they that make him covetous and impious; close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood, he has the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself.³⁵

Elsewhere he reminds us that in our own time “the timeless message of Nature constitutes a spiritual viaticum of the first importance.”³⁶

Ritual life was largely given over to a re-entry into the *illud tempus* of the Dreaming, a time which is sacred

because it [is] sanctified by the real presence and activity of the Supernatural Beings. But like all other species of “sacred time”, although infinitely remote, it is not inaccessible. It can be reactualized through ritual.³⁷

Through ritual life the members of the tribe not only recuperated sacred time but by reiterating the paradigmatic acts of the supernatural powers they helped to regenerate life by “recreating the world”.³⁸ To neglect these awesome cosmic responsibilities would be to allow the world to regress into darkness and chaos.³⁹

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 12 and p. 178.

³⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, p. 41.

³⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, p. 13.

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, p.43.

³⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, p.61.

³⁹ Indeed here we have one of the keys to the demoralisation of those survivors who must live in a world made meaningless by their separation from the land and the consequent annihilation of their ritual life.

The spiritual integrity of the Aboriginal tradition was preserved by individuals variously called *karadjis*, “medicine men”, “clever men”, shamans, or, in Elkin’s terms, “men of high degree”. It was their role to cure the sick, defend the community against “black” magic, perform vital functions in the communal ritual life, especially in initiation rituals, and to serve as cultural and spiritual exemplars by way of their access to occult powers and their custody of the mythological and ceremonial heritage. These men were viaducts, so to speak, between the supernatural and mundane worlds.⁴⁰ The initiation ceremonies (always involving a death and rebirth experience), the central role of visions and other ecstatic experiences, and the healing functions of the men of high degree are reminiscent of shamanic practices in Tibet, Siberia and amongst the Indians of both North and South America.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the Aboriginal tradition developed its own esoteric spiritual practices and metaphysical wisdom to which the medicine men conformed themselves and by which they were sanctified.⁴²



The Marks of Tradition

Aboriginal culture exhibited four emblems of *all* religious traditions. Firstly, *a divine source*. As we have seen, the origins of this tradition are primordial, stretching back into time immemorial. We cannot anchor its origins in historical time nor tie it to any place, person, event or book. Nonetheless, we can declare that this mythological-ritual complex was not and could not have been of merely human provenance though doubtless its spiritual economy providentially reflected the psychic receptivities of the Aboriginal peoples. As Schuon has affirmed, “Traditions appear out of the Infinite like flowers; they can no more be invented than the sacred art which is their witness and proof.”⁴³

They are no longer able to participate in the Dreamtime nor to fulfil those ritual obligations which gave life dignity and purpose. The substitutes and palliatives the modern white world offers are, of course, tawdry and trivial in comparison whether they be sinister, as in the case of alcohol, or comparatively benign and well-intentioned—a Western “education” for instance.

⁴⁰ See Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, pp.128ff and 156ff; A. P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977; and James Cowan, *The Aborigine Tradition*, Shaftesbury: Element, 1992, Ch. 6.

⁴¹ See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1964, and *Australian Religions*, pp. 128-164, and A. P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, pp. 57-58, 60-64.

⁴² See James Cowan, *Mysteries of the Dreaming: The Spiritual Life of Australian Aborigines*, Bridport: Prism, 1989, Ch. 1.

⁴³ Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, p120.

Secondly the Aboriginal tradition enshrined *a doctrine* about the nature and “relationship” of the Absolute and the relative, the Real and the relatively or provisionally real. In the case of the Aborigines, as with the American Indians, the doctrines were not cast in the mould of a book or a collection of canonical writings, nor formulated in abstract dogmatic language but, rather, inhered in the relationship of the Aboriginal to the whole cosmos. As Schuon remarked, metaphysical doctrines do not of necessity find their expression only in verbal forms but can be expressed visually and ritually:

...the criterion of metaphysical truth or of its depth lies not in the complexity or difficulty of its expression, but in the quality and effectiveness of its symbolism, having regard to a particular capacity of understanding or style of thinking. Wisdom does not lie in any complication of words but in the profundity of the intention...⁴⁴

The doctrine of the Aborigines is ingrained in their mythology, ritual life and sacred art, each of these dimensions of Aboriginal culture hinging, so to speak, on a sacramental relationship with the land itself. It is also worth pointing out that their sense of the sacred expresses itself most readily in spatial rather than temporal terms. A failure to understand this principle lies behind the evident incomprehension of the anthropologists in the face of the central conception of the Dreaming, a category of the sacred which escapes completely the grip of all profane and linear notions of time, not to say of “history”.

The third mark of any integral tradition, inseparable from the doctrine, is *a spiritual method*, a way which enables its practitioners to cleave to the Absolute, to conform their being to the demands of Eternity. Aboriginal spirituality was expressed primarily through rites and ceremonies. Indeed, one commentator has remarked that there can have been few cultures so dominated by ritual life.⁴⁵ Contrary to anthropologists’ claims about the social “functions” of these rituals the crucial purpose of ceremonial life was to put both the tribe and the individual into right relationship with the Dreaming and with the natural world, the material vestment in which the Eternal was clothed.

⁴⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p.11.

⁴⁵ James Cowan, *The Aborigine Tradition*, p. 53.

Fourthly we find *the formal embodiment of tradition* in the sacred arts and sciences which determine the character of a civilisation and which give it its own spiritual “personality”, if one might so express it. Here we need look no further than Aboriginal art: far from being the “childish scratchings” of “ignorant savages” this art constitutes a rich symbolic vocabulary, always rooted in the natural order but comprising the vehicle for the most complex metaphysical ideas and the most resonant spiritual messages. Here we find an art that conforms to Schuon’s claim that,

Traditional art derives from a creativity which combines heavenly inspiration with ethnic genius, and which does so in the manner of a science endowed with rules and not by way of individual improvisation: *ars sine scientia nihil*.⁴⁶

Aboriginal art assumed many different forms: sand sculptures, rock wall art, body painting and decoration, ritual objects, and, in later times, bark paintings. Many of these incorporated pictorial designs and all were symbolic, not in the superficial modern sense whereby a symbol “stands in” for something else, more or less arbitrarily, but in the traditional sense which was re-articulated by Coleridge:

A symbol is characterized...above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity of which it is representative.⁴⁷

Traditional art is never arbitrary nor subjective but informed by a language which rests on the analogies between spiritual realities and transitory material phenomena which, by way of this relationship, carry qualitative symbolic significances. It is in this context that we must understand the indifference of Aboriginal art to the claims of a naturalistic aesthetic which seeks to “imitate” nature, to accurately reproduce the surfaces and appearances of the material world. As Schuon so often insisted, artistic naturalism proceeds from an exteriorizing and materialistic mentality which could not be normative in any traditional civilisation.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, London: Perennial Books, 1981, p. 83.

⁴⁷ Coleridge quoted in Adrian Snodgrass, *Time, Architecture and Eternity: The Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings*, Vol 1, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1990, p. 44.

⁴⁸ See Frithjof Schuon, “The Degrees of Art” in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, pp. 183-198; “Principles and Criteria of Art” in *The Language of the Self*, Ganesh, Madras, 1959, pp. 102-135; and “Aesthetics and Symbolism in Art and Nature” in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, Perennial Books, London, 1959, pp. 24-49.

Aboriginal art conveyed transcendental values and metaphysical truths to the social collectivity. By-passing the pitfalls of abstract and merely ratiocinative thought it was accessible to all mentalities and through its symbolism addressed the whole person rather than the mind only, thereby actualizing the teachings of tradition. The contrast with our own modern art could hardly be more dramatic, confronted as we so often are by an “art” which is flagrantly, indeed boastfully anti-traditional, governed by a rampant individualism and an insatiable appetite for novelty, preoccupied with an aestheticism attuned to the fashions of the day, directed towards little more than the stimulation of the senses, and quite indifferent to any spiritual function, an art characterized by stylistic excesses veering from a pedantic naturalism on one side to the grotesqueries of an inhuman surrealism on the other. Aboriginal art which retains even some of its traditional character is like a mountain stream next to the cesspit of much modern art.⁴⁹



The Lessons of Aboriginal Tradition

The Aboriginal tradition enshrined *a sense of proportion and an ordered scheme of values and priorities* which gave precedence to the spiritual, which stamped everyday life with a sense of the imperishable, and which afforded humankind an ontological dignity all but impossible to recover in a world which is prepared to countenance talk of the human being as a “naked ape”. In our own culture, swayed by the sentimental prejudices of the age and dedicated to the pursuit of a selfish and barbarous “progress”, Aboriginal culture can stand as a reminder of those human possibilities on which we have so often turned our backs. It can remind us anew that we live, in the fullest sense, only in relation to the Absolute.

⁴⁹ It is true that in recent years Aboriginal art has been afforded a new respect and a rather fashionable “status” within both the Australian and the international art establishment. Unhappily this new attitude is often informed by altogether anti-traditional values whereby Aboriginal art is seen primarily in terms of aesthetically pleasing “craft” objects which are expressions of the material culture of the Aborigines. As one commentator has recently observed “Australian Aboriginal art remains the last great non-European cultural form available to the voracious appetite of the European art machine.” (T. Smith, “Black Art: Its Genius Explained”, *The Independent Monthly* September 1989, p.18.) A sacred art resonant with symbolic and spiritual messages is thus wrenched out of its ceremonial context, is culturally appropriated and eventually becomes an art commodity on which the art market fixes a monetary value. Again, a sad and familiar story in many parts of the globe. See Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indians*, p. 134.

In a culture tyrannized by time and imprisoned in historicism, the Aboriginal indifference to profane history can provide us with another perspective on our earthly existence. The messages implicit in Aboriginal culture can, of course, have no meaning for those whose materialistic worldview leaves them utterly obtuse to anything and everything of a spiritual order. As Eliade has remarked, many students of archaic religions ultimately “take refuge in a materialism or behaviourism impervious to every spiritual shock”.⁵⁰

Anyone not in the grip of prejudices of this kind cannot study Aboriginal religion without being continually reawakened to *a sense of the sacred*. If we are to ask what precisely constitutes the “sacred” we can do no better than turn again to Schuon. That is sacred, he writes,

which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly possesses the character of absolute certainty, and thirdly, eludes the comprehension and power of investigation of the ordinary human mind...The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.⁵¹

To reanimate such a sense is one of the most invaluable services which cultures such as that of the Australian Aborigines might perform for the contemporary world. Without a sense of the sacred we are lost in the world of accidental contingencies. As Schuon again reminds us,

When people talk about “civilisation” they generally attribute a qualitative meaning to the term, but really civilisation only represents a value provided it is supra-human in origin and implies for the civilised man a sense of the sacred...A sense of the sacred is fundamental for every civilisation because fundamental for man: the sacred—that which is immutable, inviolable and so infinitely majestic—is in the very substance of our spirit and of our existence.⁵²

It is not without some irony that it is the so-called “primitive”, quite free from any complicity in the pathologies of modernity, who recalls us to this sense of the sacred.

⁵⁰ M. Eliade, *The Quest: Meaning and History in Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, p. 62. See also p. 36.

⁵¹ F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, p. 48.

⁵² *ibid.*, p.33. Elsewhere Schuon writes, “It is one of the most pernicious of errors to believe, firstly, that the human collectivity as such represents an unconditional or absolute value, and secondly that the well-being of this collectivity represents any such value...”. *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p. 443.

Aboriginal society was one in harmony with nature rather than one intent on “conquest” and plunder; the millennia during which the Aborigines lived alone on the continent left it in a more or less primordial state of “Edenic innocence”, if one might so express it. As Schuon has remarked of the American Indians, if there is an element of ineluctable fatality in the disappearance of this paradise, this in no wise excuses the villainies to which the Aborigines have been subjected over the last two centuries.⁵³

The Aborigines found in the world about them not only beauty and harmony but signs of *divine intent* to which men could and should conform themselves. This lies at the heart of their relationship to the land. One of the many lessons we can learn is that a properly-constituted ecological awareness can only be built on the foundations of what is ultimately a *spiritual recognition* of the holiness of the world around us: furthermore, this sacredness is conferred by the immaterial and spiritual realities which the world of nature reflects. At the same time we can say that Aboriginal religion was life-affirming in the most down-to-earth fashion, or, to put it another way, for the Aboriginal outlook the sacred was always materially incarnated in the realm of nature.

No amount of fashionable concern about the evils of pollution, no amount of “socially responsible” science, nor of the idolisation of “Nature” can in any way substitute for the spiritual intuition which lies at the heart of many primal cultures. For modern man,

It is not a matter of projecting a supersaturated and disillusioned individualism into a desecrated Nature—this would be a worldliness like any other—but, on the contrary, of rediscovering in Nature, on the basis of the traditional outlook, the divine substance which is inherent in it; in other words, to “see God everywhere...”⁵⁴

Of course, the sacredness of the world is necessarily inaccessible to a view which sees the planet as nothing more than a configuration of physical properties and energies, and “knowledge” as a quantitative accumulation of data about these material phenomena.

⁵³ See Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, pp. 41-43.

⁵⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, p. 13.

The symbolist outlook, exemplified by the Aborigines, eludes the grasp of “Single Vision” in absolute fashion.⁵⁵

Aboriginal man also offers us *an exemplum of spiritual responsibility and authenticity*. As Mircea Eliade has observed

..it would be wrong to believe that the religious man of primitive and archaic societies refuses to assume the responsibility for a genuine existence. On the contrary...he courageously assumes immense responsibilities—for example, that of collaborating in the creation of the cosmos, or of creating his own world, or of ensuring the life of plants and animals, and so on. But it is a different kind of responsibility from those that, to us moderns, appear to be the only genuine and valid responsibilities. It is a responsibility on the cosmic plane, in contradistinction to the moral, social or historical responsibilities that are alone regarded as valid in modern civilisations. From the point of view of profane existence, man feels no responsibility except to himself and to society...⁵⁶

In his magisterial study of the crisis of modern civilisation, *The Reign of Quantity*, René Guénon refers to

...the darkest enigmas of the modern world, enigmas which the world itself denies because it is incapable of perceiving them although it carries them within itself, and because this denial is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of the special mentality whereby it exists.⁵⁷

Those enigmas can only be unravelled by recourse to the wisdom which existed within the cadre of all integral traditions, including that of Australia’s indigenous people. As Schuon reminds us, no people anywhere has been bereft of a religious tradition animated by spiritual insights and values. It is only we moderns who have invented a godless and spiritless world, a desacralized universe. The ultimately important lessons of any traditional culture do not invite any kind of “imitation”, which would be quite fruitless, but a return to the sources of the perennial wisdom which can always be found within our own religious tradition if only we have the will to look.

Suggested reading

⁵⁵ See Frithjof Schuon, “The Symbolist Mind” in *The Feathered Sun*, pp. 3-13. “Single Vision”—William Blake’s characterisation of the scientific mentality.

⁵⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 93.

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(c) on Tradition

⁵⁷ René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, Penguin, 1972, p. 11.

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