

## AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL RELIGION

The early explorers and colonists failed to see anything they could call a religion among the Aboriginal peoples. They could see no reference to God or gods; there were no churches or other sacred buildings; there were no scriptures, and no priests or other religious officers. The furnishings of religion seemed totally absent. Westerners see religion as a distinct, institutionalised segment of society and social life. The rituals and beliefs, that were such an intrinsic part of Aboriginal life, were seen merely as ingrained, primitive superstition rather than a religion in the proper sense. Since those early days, a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and religion has developed.

However, as students of religion have refined their understanding of its real nature and come to appreciate the depth and complexity of Aboriginal beliefs and rituals, Aboriginal religion has been recognised as possessing the basic and universal ingredients of religion world-wide, and as representing the primary expressions of humankind's religious instinct. Deborah Rose (1987) declares, "We are talking about a profoundly moving representation of humanity's search for religious meaning."

Aborigines have a strong sense of the underlying spiritual nature of reality. They have a sense of transcendence in the community, in their ancestry, in their history and in the land. They sense that they are part of a greater, ultimate whole, even though this does not translate into a specific belief in God.

In recent times there has been extensive study of Aboriginal religion by specialist scholars. W.H. Edwards (1988) recognises the antiquity of Aboriginal culture and says that evidence from burial sites indicates that beliefs and ritual systems held and practised today go back many thousands of years. More importantly, Ronald and Catherine Berndt have studied Aboriginal customs, beliefs and rituals in many regions for several decades and have explored the concept of *dreaming* that, under various names in the many local Aboriginal languages, is so central in all Aboriginal culture. It is here that they find common perceptions of cosmic creation, spiritual power, a living, communicating and totally interdependent cosmos, veneration of their ancestral past and a rich mythology to express their beliefs (Berndt R M & C H 1988). All these features can be found in one or more of the main religions of the world.

Aboriginal spirituality embodies an appreciation of their integral relationship with their environment, something that has been largely lost in Western, Christian society - with disastrous consequences. Rose comments on the problems raised by the Western fondness for dualisms where Aborigines see unity. Cartesian dichotomy of mind and matter has contributed strongly to the disastrous error of mentally separating ourselves from our physical source - the earth. Also, our Western distinction between sacred and secular is entirely foreign to Aborigines.

Materialism and a mechanistic view of the universe still persist among many scientists and among the public today. Nevertheless, a number of scientists and philosophers have recognised the universe, as Aborigines do, as a living, conscious organism. Charles Birch (2008) discusses 'pansubjectivism' - the theory that, even in the fundamental particles of matter, the universe possesses mind. Mathematical

cosmologist, Brian Swimme, declares that we should see the universe, not as a physical object but as a spiritual event.

With the emergence of nature-focussed spirituality among searchers for meaning today, I think we could say that Aboriginal religion reflects not only the deep past of Western religion; it may reflect its future also.

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