

INTRODUCTION

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This is a unique volume.

It is the first collection of essays in World Religions to be published by the first Australian national association to have as its purpose scholarly explorations into the immense Humanities subject-field of Religion Studies.

If the story behind this volume were told, it would have to deal with a series of recent breakthrough developments, particularly in the triennium 1974-76. These events would include:

- (a) moves in Australian public education to deal more adequately with world religions and the religious dimension of human life;
- (b) the formation of Religion Studies Departments at several Colleges of Advanced Education and at two Universities;
- (c) the surprising nation-wide interest shown in the First South Australian Conference on Religions in 1975;
- (d) the subsequent formation of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) and the first National Conference of that body in 1976;
- (e) awareness of the extent to which Religion and religions were already being studied across Australia in numerous 'non-religion' departments in some sixty tertiary institutions (as revealed in a 1976 AASR survey).

The central fact may simply be this: that in the mid-seventies scholars from many traditions and representing many disciplines have suddenly discovered one another! Their coming together from Papua-New Guinea, New Zealand and the South Pacific, as well as from all Australian States, has generated a new and exciting sense of corporate adventure into a subject field of fundamental importance and endless interest. The rapid initial growth in AASR membership gives evidence of an idea whose time has come.

Nine of the ten chapters in this volume are major addresses or sectional papers carefully selected from the twentyeight presentations made at the Inaugural AASR Conference held at Adelaide, South Australia, in August 1976. The tenth paper was read at a meeting of one of the Regional Chapters which have since come into existence across the nation.

Among so many papers of scholarly merit and interest, these ten have been selected in order best to illustrate the range and depth of modern Studies in Religion, to highlight some current issues, and to promote dialogue. The focus of future volumes will almost certainly be different, for publishable material is already accumulating around specific themes and within particular traditions and disciplines. As far

as this volume is concerned, however, the essays are representative contributions to four major areas within our subject-field:

(a) Four Studies in Folk and Primal Religions

Appropriately, the first paper is by an Australian sociologist, **Peter Glasner**, from Australia's National University, calling for a more discriminating look at the religious dimension of Australian life.

Glasner agrees with Thomas Luckmann that the norms of traditional religious institutions, as congealed in an 'official' or formerly 'official' model of religion, cannot serve as a yardstick for assessing religion in contemporary society. The author distinguishes 'the religious' from 'religion' so that to note the secularization of our culture and the relative weakness of our institutionalised religion is not to concede that Australians are to that extent irreligious! On the contrary, the diverse expressions of folk religion and belief in this nation illustrate that 'religion' is thriving among us 'folk'.

The many terms used by scholars to refer to the wide-ranging expressions of alternative religiosity in our time are reviewed by Dr. Glasner. He then clarifies his own concept of 'Australian Folk Religion' by looking at examples of cultic and social movements, the underworld of Occult Sciences, a potential Australian 'civil religion' discernable in the Anzac Day ritual and its associated myths of mateship and sacrifice, 'the great Australian religion of Aussie Rules', and the recurring experiences of ecstatic self-transcendence afforded by sport, mateship and beer (the trinitarian 'basis of Australia's cultural style'). Much of this 'folk religion' interfuses official religion, although currently it may be enjoying an increasing autonomy. In any case, Glasner has alerted us to aspects and dimensions of an Australian religiosity which, by its very nature, has hardly heretofore been seen as 'religion'.

Harold Turner, in his two discussions of Primal Religions, also employs the term 'Folk Religion'. He defines it as: *the popular or village or peasant religion that has a remarkable solidarity across the world, but which is not a self-contained system since it exists in symbiotic relationship with one of the universal religions in its more orthodox and sophisticated forms*. Such 'folk religion', for Turner, has much in common with many 'primal religions', and it is to the careful consideration of these primal religions that he invites us.

At issue is the religion of some two to three hundred million people in various parts of the world. Inappropriate attitudes toward primal societies are reflected in an embarrassing profusion of terms, e.g., primitive, pagan, native, tribal, animist, ethnic, non-historical, traditional, archaic (and worse). The term 'primal', however, is being increasingly used, and Turner commends it on two grounds: firstly, the religions concerned are the most fundamental religious forms in the overall history of mankind, and secondly, they have preceded and contributed to the other great religious systems. In short, the 'primals' are both primary and prior.

Turner suggests a six-feature framework to assist in the analysis and understanding of these religions and to display them as authentically religious. He stresses their educational and religious potential and predicts considerable development in the study of the Primal Religions in the next decade. For him there is irony in the fact that while the major expansions of Christianity have been not into the areas of the great culture-religions of Asia or into Islamic areas but solely into societies having primal religious systems, and while the primals have made the greatest response to Christianity, it is precisely the primals which have been least examined and appreciated in Religion Studies Departments in countries within the Christian tradition.

One consequence of the last four hundred years of Christian missionary expansion into the areas of primal societies, has been a bewildering proliferation of 'New Religious Movements' – 'new' in the sense of being post-interaction phenomena, and also 'new' in form and content when compared to the two contributing religions involved. (Hinduism and Buddhism have also, but in a limited way, produced such 'new' religious movements). In his second paper, Harold Turner brings this whole new dimension of the interaction between the Primals and the Christian religious tradition clearly into focus. He discusses the origins, causes, distinctive forms and world range of these new post-interaction religious phenomena, and offers both a religious typology and a sociological classification for dealing with them.

This first section concludes with a very specific empirical study. **Roma O'Neill** reports her recent field work in a Balinese village where Hinduism long ago 'encountered' local indigenous religion. O'Neill describes an example of 'institutionalised' spirit possession and healing rites within a village of a thousand people. Her careful documentation of a ritual that appears to date back to the mid-nineteenth century, is followed by a discussion of aspects of Balinese cosmology and theology which the ritual emphasises, and by Appendices recording the songs and legend associated with the ritual.

(b) Three Studies in Traditional World Religions

The next three representative papers illustrate studies in three world religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese Religion.

First, **Arvind Sharma** reviews a problem in the interpretation of the classic text of popular Hinduism, the Bhagavad-Gita. Since the Gita was revealed on the eve of the fratricidal battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and since at its beginning and its end the Lord Krishna urges, in every possible way, that the battle be joined, it seems clear that the sacred text, literally interpreted, *commends violence*. That the Gita should, therefore, have been condemned and allegorized is not surprising, but it is surprising – and unique, says Sharma – that the great twentieth century apostle of *ahimsa*, Mahatma Gandhi, should have found that the Gita was a *warning against violence* and that *non-violence* is its real message.

Secondly, **Peter Fenner** considers a central theme in the Mahayana Buddhist understanding of existence. There are, perhaps, only a few readers of this volume who can claim acquaintance with the profundities of Buddhist thought. The rest of us, having heard about *samsara* and *nirvana*, may well have understood these terms to refer to radically distinct orders of being. Any invitation to understand them as *identical* might well seem to us a counsel of utter confusion.

And yet, in the scriptures of *Mahayana Buddhism*, particularly in the *Madhyamika* school, one comes across the assertion that *samsara* — the level of mundane existence, characterised by suffering and in which most people are immersed — is not different from, in fact is identical with, *nirvana* — the liberating and enlightening level of being wherein all sufferings, doubts and delusions are transcended. How can this be? Fenner assures us that even a partial understanding of the meaning and truth contained in such assertions can be very productive in clearing away some of the misconceptions which surround the spiritual endeavour as seen from a *Buddhist perspective*.

Thirdly, **Paul Rule's** paper ('Sacred and Secular in China') is a discussion of religion in *the Chinese Tradition*. But it is more than that! Dr. Rule, a Western scholar, urges other Western scholars to be dissatisfied with any definition of religion, or criterion of 'the religious', which cannot embrace the great Chinese Tradition. Rule finds, for example, that Mircea Eliade's familiar sacred/profane dichotomy is inappropriate to a tradition that does not distinguish between religious and secular. In the end, he takes a clue from Peter Berger's *A Rumour of Angels* (and from Huston Smith) and considers 'transcendence' as an ultimate criterion of 'the religious', applying it to Maoism as a test-case. Paul Rule's paper serves as a transition to the next section and might well have been included there.

(c) Two Critical and Constructive Studies in Religion

Despite the recent revival of interest in the Marxist critique of religion, **Wayne Hudson** finds that the critical analysis of that critique is in a parlous state. In their treatment of religion, Marx and Marxists have displayed imprecision, inconsistency and naivete along with powerful insight. Hudson wants to take us back to 'central assertions in Marx's critique which are relevant to the possibility of a more positive Marxist critique of religion'. The author is not attempting to theologise Marx or to attribute to him a sympathy for religion which he clearly lacked, but he is concerned with 'the implications that can be drawn from Marx *contra* Marx's own emphasis and intentions.' Hudson's analysis focusses certain crucial issues for any future Marxist approach to religion, viz., 'the need to determine the specificity of religion', 'the need to clarify how religious projections are related to human projectivism generally' (including the projections of Marxist revolutionaries themselves!), and 'the need to discover whether the content of religion is separable from the forms in which it has so far manifested itself.'

The other paper in this section is also concerned with a *positive critical approach to Religion*. Australian **John May** missed the Inaugural Conference but while back briefly in Australia from Germany he delivered his paper to a meeting of the South Australian Chapter of the AARS early in 1977.

Dr. May asks 'a deceptively simple question': *Can religions solve problems?* Are the great religions really providing consolation and orientation for the enlightened citizens of contemporary pluralist technological societies? Or have they already entered into what Jurgen Habermas calls a stage of 'terminal coma'?

John May's deliberately naive question is explored with persistent honesty and sophistication. He is looking away from those contemplative and culturally conditioned problems which have so massively preoccupied religious thought (e.g., 'whether we are justified by faith or works, whether there is a transmigration of souls, whether Nirvana is the extinguishing of consciousness, whether the Qur'an is the Word of God') and would urge religions to attend to those crucial present problems that are transcultural in nature, e.g., how to distribute the riches of the earth, how to establish free societies, how to control technology. Dr. May is not discussing 'relevance'. He is talking about truth! Do religions have anything to do with truth? If there can be no positive answer to this question, does it follow – or does it not follow – that religion, after all, has no future?

(d) One Essay in Religion Education

The AASR aims not only to 'stimulate Australian scholarship and research' but also 'to encourage effective instruction'. On both counts, **Albert Moore's** discussion of the place of the Visual in Teaching about Religions merits inclusion. Professor Moore offers more than a pedagogical rationale. He gives us a thoughtful analysis of the inner relations between Art and Religion.

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