

**The Dreamtime, Christianity and Hinduism:
A Brief Comparison**

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It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that the full complexity, richness and importance of Australian Aboriginal religion and culture is beginning to be understood by non Aboriginals (Charlesworth 1984, p.5).

In this article I describe my understanding of the "Dreamtime", its importance and relevance to Aboriginal life and the relationship between Aboriginal religious experience and the Dreamtime. I then describe briefly the Hindu and Christian religious traditions particularly in the context of religious experience. I then compare the three traditions and attempt to show the similarities, differences and unique points of each one.

The Dreamtime or Dreaming is seen by Aborigines as a period during which the world was created by the great Ancestral Spirits. The world existed, but only as featureless matter. The ancestral spirits manifested themselves and went about the continent camping, singing and hunting; as they travelled from place to place they created, "sung into existence" (Lawlor, 1991 p.36), the topographical features of the land and all the manifest forms.

They embodied their spiritual essence in all material things, this energy is especially powerful in unusual topographical features such as caves, rock formations and waterholes. These various sites represent significant 'creation activities' of the ancestral beings and are known as 'sacred sites'. Throughout the continent these sacred sites are linked by 'dreaming tracks' or 'song lines' (ibid., p. 48). These represent the journeys of the ancestral spirits as they went about 'energizing' the land and creating the 'Law'. These lines are a spiritual map of the whole country (Charlesworth (b) 1988 p.20). They are important because they connect Aborigines of the same 'ancestral affinities' even though they differ in

other ways such as language. It is important to note that there are many aboriginal religions under the one umbrella of the Dreamtime.

The Dreamtime 'Law' as expressed in the mythological stories clearly shows the Aboriginal how to live his or her life in 'all' respects. The 'Law' also centres an individual within themselves; they know where they come from, who they are and their special connection with the world.

The Dreamtime refers not only to the primordial past when creation took place but also to the present living world; "It is rather the ever present, unseen, ground of being – of existence" (Elkin 1969, p.88). Although the ancestor spirits when finished with their creation 'went up into the sky' or 'disappeared into the waters' they left their spiritual essence in the material world and they continue to exist in a transcendental realm (Charlesworth (b) 1988, p.24).

The Aborigine's relationship to the Dreamtime is one of total integration or interaction. It is not seen as 'out there' nor is it seen as something to turn to only in time of trouble. The spiritual life of the Aborigine cannot be separated from mundane life because;

For them, as for perhaps no other culture, the earth is centre of the intelligence of creation; a symbol and memory of the primordial Dreaming; a receptacle of all seeds, cosmic, metaphysical and biological; the nurturer of all life, both visible and invisible. By testimony to the songs and energy of the earth the aborigines hear the voices of the universal Dreaming. (Lawlor 1991, p.18).

The Dreamtime provides 'everything' the aborigine needs for existence: the mundane world; the laws of kinship; 'totemic' relationship to the land, plants and animals; ethical and social codes of behaviour. There is no need, in fact no purpose to question these 'Laws', they are all clearly written in the material world. "They are self-authenticating" (Charlesworth (b) 1988 p.23). By ceremonies, rites,

art, hunting and producing families the Aborigines are celebrating, participating in, and in a sense re-creating the Dreamtime.

As previously mentioned the Aborigine knows 'who' he or she is; this is mainly due to the idea of 'conception sites', the place where the mother conceived is seen to be 'totemically' connected to the ancestral spirits, this is where the spirit child entered the mother (Tonkinson 1984, pp.107-23).

Aboriginal religious practice is very much a group affair, with no place for or tolerance of, radicals or non conformists. Unusual mystical visions are discussed with the group, more or less for authentication and approval (Charlesworth 1979). It is my contention that traditional Aborigines lived in a perpetual 'mystical state', I discuss this further on.

The Christian worldview is characterised by belief in one God. This God created the 'heavens and earth' from nothing as told in the Genesis myth. The way to union with God is divided into two quite different approaches. Firstly, the intellectual approach which was emphasised by the Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus. The way to achieve union with God (The One) was by way of transcending the material or sensual world through intellectual contemplation. "The supreme achievement of the intellect is to leave itself behind" (Charlesworth 1972 p.11). The ecstasy of union with The One was achieved not by negating the intellect but by through it. This approach was also very elitist and union with The One was only possible for a small number of highly educated within society.

Secondly, the latter Christian mystics such as St John of the Cross followed the general trend of St Augustine and St Gregory of Nyssa in that 'love of God' and a life of 'active' prayer were the main ways to prepare one for union with God. These mystics believed, had absolute 'faith', that God was a loving, personal God who if he thought the human worthy would gratuitously allow mystical union to occur (Charlesworth (a) 1988, p.29).

Modern mystics and devout Christians believe that the 'love of God', either directly or through his 'material incarnation' Jesus Christ, is the way to salvation and mystical union. Most modern adherents of Christianity hold that union with

God is available to 'all' humans and all that is required is a belief in the scriptures; prayer; and a love of God through Christ.

The Hindu worldview is very complex, it is only possible in the space available to give a very brief overview and from the perspective of the Bhagavad-Gita. The Gita has been described as the New Testament of the Hindus, continuing this analogy the Vedic scriptures would be something like the Old Testament. The Gita or 'Lord's Song' is one book of the Mahabharata. The Hindu sees God in many ways, variously as; "...the impersonal principle in the universe (Brahman), as the 'essence' of all things (atman), as the unmanifest (akshara) as the manifest (Ishvara), as the Vedic Vishnu, as the 'one self' and as Krishna himself" (Bilimoria 1988, p.38).

In the Gita Lord Krishna an 'embodiment' of Vishnu instructs Arjuna (about to fight in battle) in spiritual, ethical and philosophical matters. This discourse results in a 'document' that I see as a sort of 'philosophy for all people in all places', the popularity of the Gita attests to this assertion. Krishna describes the different types of yogas to Arjuna such as karma-yoga (right action), bhakti yoga (devotion), buddhi- yoga (intelligent will) and jnana-yoga (wisdom). Yoga can be understood as "a way of becoming one with"; hence one who practices bhakti-yoga would be endeavouring to become one with the object of devotion through 'devotion'.

The breadth and scope of the yogas means the Gita speaks to humans from all walks of life and allows them to fulfil their 'dharma' (social/life duty, particularly due to birth circumstances) through the practice of one or more of the yogas. Krishna makes this quite clear in the Gita [3].35 "It is more salutary to carry out your own Law poorly than another's Law well it is better to die in your own Law than to prosper in another's."

The Hindu worldview sees the 'real self' (atman) as imperishable and unchangeable. This self must incarnate many times until it realises, that attachment to "the fruits of actions" is what keeps one bound to the material round of birth and re-birth.

Various scholars argue about the relative importance of the yogas; Shankara favours jnana-yoga (wisdom) over karma-yoga (right action), whereas Ramanuja

believed the opposite was true. Although there is some opinion to the contrary (Ramanuja), the majority of Hindu scholars (Shankara, Radhakrishnan) hold that through nirvana or enlightenment one does not remain separate but is absorbed into God's 'oneness'(ibid., p.60). The Gita provides the means for 'every' Hindu to reach mystical union with the 'ultimate', regardless of their station in life.

Having described, very basically, the three religious worldviews I will now compare their most important similarities and differences. All three traditions have two important basic factors in common; Firstly, the belief in a creator/creators who transcend the normal, rational mundane world and who have 'materialised' in one form or another to guide mankind. (1) Ancestral spirits; (2) God through Jesus Christ; (3) various 'avatars' such as Lord Krishna and Shiva.

Secondly, these traditions 'at very least' all provide an ethical framework to guide humans both individually and socially. The Dreamtime Law for Aborigines states this quite clearly; kinship and totemic 'laws' especially. The Ten Commandments and the scriptures of The New Testament provide ethical and moral guidance for Christians and the Bhagavad Gita provides this for Hindus. Although the practical aspects of the mundane interpretation of these 'Laws' differ between the traditions, the adherence to them is a prerequisite in all of the traditions to achieving union with their respective 'Gods'.

I find a parallel between the Aboriginal totemic connection to the 'conception' site (and resultant required duty and responsibilities) and the Hindu's 'dharma' (a consequence of incarnation). This parallel does not extend to Christianity by reason of birth.

For the Aboriginal there are numerous 'creative ancestral spirits' and although he or she 'knows' that the spirits are interested in humans (Stanner 1984, p.145) they cannot have the same relationship with these ancestors as the Christian can with their loving, personal God nor the same as the Hindu's union with the 'oneness' of Brahman.

As previously mentioned I believe Aborigines live in a perpetual low level mystical state. "With your vision you see me sitting on a rock, but I am sitting on the body of my ancestor. The earth, his body, and my body are identical." (ABC

1990). Although this statement implies 'absolute oneness', such as union with Brahman, duality still exists. When the Aborigine is 'animated' at ceremonies by ancestor spirits (Charlesworth (b) 1988, p.32). the mystical state is one of increased intensity rather than a different state.

The Christian approaches the 'ultimate' with the idea of transcending the material world through: either pure faith in the written scriptures; love of God and Christ; or the more intellectual contemplation of the Neo-Platonists. When union occurs it is on a spiritual plane and at God's initiative. When 'oneness' occurs for the Aborigine it is still grounded in the material realm, they more or less make themselves available for the existent spirits to manifest through them.

For the Hindu, by whichever yoga he or she attains union, it is more of a non identification with anything; that is, an absorption into the totalness of existence.

Although I have shown that each of these traditions believes in a transcendent creator/creators the 'form' of these is very different. The approach to union with this 'transcendent existence' is also very different. The uniqueness of the Christian religious experience is the possibility of mystical union with one God. The uniqueness of the Hindu religious expectation is that of continued incarnations to 'this' material world until the person learns non attachment to the 'fruits of actions'. Although it is possible to experience the state of 'nirvana' whilst living in the material world. The uniqueness of Aboriginal religious experience is the total identification with the land and simultaneously with the spiritual realm.

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