

WANDJINISM -THE WORLD'S OLDEST RELIGION

A few years ago, I was in the local library and just happened to see a book on one of the shelves, 'The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions'. Interested, I took it down and browsed through it. Well, it had every conceivable religion in it from all over the world, -except Australia. To make sure, I turned to the word index at the back and it had no reference whatsoever to 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime'.

Somewhat incensed, I wrote a letter to the publisher, complaining they had omitted the world's oldest religion. I also enclosed a paper I had co-written with an Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Reg. Blow. I never received any acknowledgement and the deficiency remains unaddressed. The point is of course is that, even to this day, virtually nobody considers that Aboriginal people possessed a fully qualified religion.

In comparison, the Oxford Dictionary discussed the ancient Chinese religion of Daoism, (the Way) even though this religion does not address the question of a Supreme Being. Daoism instead provides an ethical system for living by proposing that we all need to exercise the virtues of Compassion, Moderation and Humility in our daily lives. Aboriginal religion does something very similar, but instead creates a practical action imperative. That is, rather than just talking in terms of personal virtues, it is instead framed in terms of the mutual obligations of Caring, Sharing and Respect.

It is also interesting that Daoism sees the world as consisting of complementary opposites, represented by the well-known concepts of Yin and Yang. Aboriginal culture has exactly the same conceptual approach, with the two halves of reality most commonly being represented by the totems of Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo.

In Aboriginal culture, the totem system is an integral part of their religion, thereby guaranteeing respect for the environment through the belief in a complex spirit world surrounding us. However, this aspect of the Aboriginal belief system has been dismissed by European culture as nothing more than 'Primitive Animism'. Such cultural arrogance does a grave disservice to the deep complexity of Aboriginal religion.

This issue is reflected in the way in which, very early in Australia's colonial history, Aboriginal people were not allowed to give evidence in court, even if they were the victim of a crime. It was considered that as Aboriginals did not believe in God, they therefore could not swear an oath on the Bible.

This was and is demonstrably untrue. The whole concept of the Dreaming comes from the fundamental proposition that the universe and everything in it, was created in an act of imagination by the Supreme Being. In other words, the Supreme Being, variously known by such Aboriginal names as Wandjina, Baiamee and Boorial, imagined the world into place, then made it real by infusing conscious life into the Dream.

Human beings were then ultimately given responsibility for protecting the world and the Dreaming that sustained it. So, because Aboriginal people believe that is human consciousness that sustains reality, they were therefore the first post-modern thinkers. The world simply does not exist without human consciousness of it.

Aboriginal people hold that human beings are solely responsible for care of the world, and so believe in a non-interventionist God. This is why Wandjina is always drawn with eyes, but no mouth. God sees everything, but says nothing. Why give human beings consciousness and free will if you are going to tell them what to do, or punish them for exercising their free will?

Aboriginal religion, which Reg Blow and I chose to call Wandjinism, is therefore categorised as a form of 'Deism', which puts it in a different conceptual category to most of the major world religions. These 'revealed religions' are instead categorised as 'Theism', which is the belief in an interventionist God.

Nonetheless, Wandjinism shares some fundamental similarities with Theist religions, such as belief in the omniscient and unknowable nature of God. For instance, in the 1880's the Kulin leader, William Barak, was asked by a visiting Frenchman, if Aboriginal people believed in God. Barak told him that the Kulin word for God was Booriel, but they didn't talk about him much. This was because, as an Infinite Being, Booriel was beyond human comprehension. You would just make yourself look silly trying to discuss something unknowable.

Similarly, while Wandjinism uses terms like 'The Great Spirit' or 'The Spirit of All Life' other faiths refer to the 'Holy Ghost'. While other religions refer to Angels and Demons, so Wandjinism refers to Nett-Netts and Mee-Mees. All religions revere their Prophets and Law-Givers, just as Wandjinism has its Ancestor Heroes.

All this therefore goes to demonstrate that, if one puts aside cultural arrogance and looks into it a little more deeply, it is readily shown that Wandjinism is a fully-fledged religion and also the world's oldest religion. It not only possesses a rational system of spiritual beliefs, but also provides an ethical basis for daily living and care of the environment.

In view of this, I think it is well and truly time that the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions woke up to itself.