
Book Review

CHARLESWORTH, Max, Françoise Dussart and Howard Morphy, eds. 2005. *Aboriginal Religions in Australia*. Aldershot: Ashgate. xiii + 324 pp. ISBN 0-7546-5128-2 (hbk). £47.50.

Indigenous religions make up the majority of the world's religious traditions—even if some of them have few practitioners. They have played enormously important roles in the study of religions, anthropology, sociology and other fieldwork-informed disciplines. Those interested in the origins and evolution of religions, the development of taboo, sacrifice, gender hierarchies, and a host of other issues have mined ethnographic texts and travellers' tales about indigenous religions. That much of this work is vitiated by the now obvious point that indigenous religious traditions are contemporaneous with the scholars seeking origins rather than with the earliest religious humans should now be clear. A more respectful phase of engagement and even dialogue with indigenous religious traditions and indigenous religionists has begun in recent years. This book evidences the new trend. It demonstrates the considerable value of carefully and respectfully attending to the specificities of particular indigenous concerns, practices and discourse. It also illustrates the point made by many recent scholars of indigenous religions that colleagues who are not particularly interested in these religions will find new interests and perspectives in such work. Even the perennial question of what "religion" means, or what it refers to, will be revitalized by discussions of indigenous religions. This latest book in Ashgate's "Vitality of Indigenous Religions" series, therefore, presents both detailed ethnographies and theoretically provocative perspectives. While it is about Aboriginal Australian religions (note the plural), it should also provoke reconsideration of all religions.

An important introduction by Max Charlesworth does far more than précis the following chapters. It introduces the study of Aboriginal religions and the contribution made by such studies to wider scholarship. Among this book's collection of the most important articles published since 1984 (the date of a previous important anthology entitled *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*), some re-evaluate and improve upon earlier studies of traditions that have been in continuous creative flux for some 50,000 years. Some foundational matters receive attention in the introduction that make the reading of the following chapters so much more fruitful. In particular, Charlesworth offers views of both ancient Aboriginal religions and of recent and contemporary developments. He situates scholarly interest in relation to wider Australian engagements with Aboriginal people. The nature of the "Dreaming" is of particular importance in understanding everything, but its specific relationships to land(s), art and law (Aboriginal and Euro-Australian) provide vital foundations for the new scholarly approaches and knowledge showcased in the book's main chapters.

Following Charlesworth's introduction there are eighteen chapters arranged in seven parts, each with its own short introduction. Rather than review specific chapters, some notes about the parts may indicate what is valuable about this collection. Part 1 offers revaluations of some classic fieldwork and theorized discussions of Aboriginal religions. Part 2 contains two chapters about "business," an Aboriginal-English word inclusive of ceremony, performance, sociality, cosmogony, kinship, lore and law. That both of these focus on women and

the gendered relationships of researchers and researched is a significant indicator of recent scholarly recognition of the benefits and problems of gender and power dynamics. Part 3 contains three chapters on “sacred places,” but these overlap with discussions of both creative and legal discourses and practices, i.e., “art” and “land rights.” They also entail discussions of the continuing unfolding of “tradition” even in the fraught situation of seeking “rights” in a modernist nation state. Part 4 continues to examine “art and religion” in three chapters. One indicator of the creativity, adaptability and (wise) humour of Aboriginal art and artists is provided by the “traditional” style dot painting “ET and friends.” But there are other surprises and challenges within these chapters too. They are followed by the three chapters of Part 4 that discuss “different Dreamings,” particularly concerned with the contemporary ramifications of Aboriginal law. These chapters are also emblematic of others in the collection as they carefully attend to the everyday living reality of Aboriginal religious life today. Law (and its implications and manifestations in land, land rights and particular places) is also the subject of the two chapters of Part 6, “Religions and Law.” A final Part (7) presents two chapters under the umbrella title of “Religious Exchanges.” The first is about Aboriginal Christianity, the second about a longstanding and ongoing encounter between Aboriginal Australians and Islam.

The heavy debt owed by theorists about religions to conversations with and appropriation from Aboriginal people is beginning to be repaid in books like this one that more carefully and respectfully attend to what is important to those encountered in fieldwork. The complex everyday lives of Aboriginal religionists deserve the kind of detailed and dialogical consideration they receive in the best of the chapters in this book. It should, thus, prove exemplary for all researchers interested in religions.

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