

PART C.

FUNCTIONAL EVALUATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

1. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN RELIGION

Before any white men had set foot upon their country, the aboriginal Central Australians had come to terms admirably with their environment, not only psychologically, but also socially; and their religious concepts likewise had been adapted to the geography of their country. Cooperation, not subordination, differentiation without inequality, tolerance for the customs and beliefs of other peoples in their own proper areas, and respect for the hunting and food-gathering grounds of other groups; these were the social and political principles upon which the organization of the aboriginal Australian communities of the inland had been based; and personal monototemism within these polytotemic communities provided a fittingly-shaped system of religious beliefs that harmonized with these principles and validated them. Totemic religion even helped to protect the indigenous fauna and flora. The Australian animals and trees were provided with adequate sanctuaries at the inviolable sacred sites, and their association with religious ritual thus ensured their survival even during the worst droughts. The dignity bestowed upon plant and animal life by totemism hence helped to preserve the balance of nature in Central Australia.

A system of religious beliefs can be judged either in regard to its theoretical logicity and validity or on the score of its practical value as a moving force in the lives of its believers. If the second criterion is adopted, then Central Australian religion must be admitted to have done two things for its believers, in the state of knowledge of nature in which they found themselves before the advent of the white man: it gave them a feeling of high personal worth based upon a sense of oneness with Eternity, and it made them more kindly, tolerant, and helpful towards their human fellows everywhere than they would have been otherwise. Contrary to our normal expectations, both of these attitudes would seem to have resulted from personal monotonism: there was no Supreme Sky Being, whose worship could have been invested by a small body of men with a single outward form, to be imposed by compulsion upon all believers. Each man's religious beliefs hence had to be left to be determined by his personal links with his own totemic personage; and his religious practices were shaped only by his own totemic centre and by the *pm̃ra kũtata* of his own patrilineal group.

The Central Australian religious observances could therefore show a generous diversity in their outward patterns from group to group, and from person to person. More importantly, the very nature of the religious beliefs prevented the rise of that particular kind of religious fanaticism which could have swept a small, but well-organized body of men into a position of authoritarian power over a large community. In the absence of such a powerful presiding body of men in Central Australia, it was not possible for any major religious leaders to establish themselves, and to compel large and varied groups of persons with very different personal and cultural backgrounds to adopt some well-unified religious systems - a system in which even the most minute details had been fixed with such meticulous care that no further deviations could be permitted to any individual believers.

At the same time, of course, the absence of a belief in a single unifying Supreme Being in the sky

also meant that the concept of a celestial paradise after death could find no place in aboriginal religion. The return of the immortal soul to its original sacred centre inexorably abandoned the mortal body and its mortal soul to death, and left no hope for any further existence of the complete human personality after death, not even in a changed form. For the sky was the only place where age, decay, and death held no dominion; and it was forever barred to all humans. However, in Central Australia the longing for the immortality of the *whole* human personality was as strong as anywhere else. At death a part of the human personality was indeed assured of survival, as we have seen; but it is clear, from the many regretful remarks appended to the stories explaining how Death came into the world, that the complete dissolution of the human body and the final extinction of all mortal life still remained a matter of deep, if resigned, sorrow. Thus my Upper Southern Aranda informants, after they had related to me the curse pronounced over mankind by the *Ntjikantja* Brothers, added the following comment:

It was these Avengers alone who were to blame [for bringing death into the world], for they did not draw back the spear [of the *Ntjikantja* Brothers, when the latter asked them to do so]. Had they drawn back this spear, they could have taken it with them, and the two Brothers would have leapt down again from the sky. They could all have moved as one party [to *Tjikara*, where the two Brothers would then have gone down in the waterhole to join their sloughed-off snake skins]. And then men could have returned to life again after death. Anyone who had died anywhere in the world, away from *Tjikara*, would have been brought here, and would have been thrown into the *Tjikara* waterhole — into the deep waterhole which never goes dry. Such men would have revived, and would have emerged alive once more from this water. Any men who had white hairs would have turned dark a second time, and would have emerged once again as young men.

2. THE COLLAPSE OF A UNIQUE SYSTEM

This geographically-based and uniquely Australian system of religion collapsed when the white man set his heels upon the Eternal Land. In the aboriginal view, the loved country, ruthlessly ripped from its original inhabitants, became a conquered land, unloved by its white robbers. Central Australia for the first time was subjected to ruthless materialistic exploitation, in order that the greed of its new "civilized" tenants and absentee landholders might be quickly satisfied. Its animals were shot at, often purely for "sport", and its trees and grasses were ravaged by short-sighted overstocking. Moving masses of rabbits ring-barked the young trees and nibbled at the roots of the perennial fodder plants. Many of the aboriginal sacred sites were plundered and violated, and many of the original dark inhabitants were turned into aimless, but unfortunately permanent, refugees in the first violent onslaught of conquest. "Our country has been turned into a desert by the senseless whites", many of the older Aranda used to tell me thirty years ago, as they pointed to a land sadly reduced from its former state of fertility by years of unprecedented drought and overstocking, and by millions of introduced rabbits. They commented bitterly on the swift destruction of the natural food plants and the almost complete extinction of many of the formerly abundant species of marsupials,²⁸ and said sadly - "The old men who knew how to summon the rain clouds, how to create the animals, and how to keep the country green, are dead now; and our land is dying too".

Time has softened many of the more lurid colours of this unlovely picture - the picture of self-styled "advanced" human beings trampling into the dirt their own high ideals of civilized and Christian conduct when dealing with a "primitive" people, whose agony was dismissed as the ignorant resistance of Stone Age savages to the advance of Culture and Progress.

Unfortunately for the Central Australians the white man first invaded their territory when the rising flood of European colonialism was drowning the resistance of non-Europeans everywhere, and when the overweening pride of the white man had reached the summit of its arrogance. Many present-day observers of the world scene feel that nineteenth-century European *hybris* has brought upon itself its own retribution in the twentieth century; and doubts about many aspects of their own traditional civilization are invading the minds of progressive thinkers everywhere in the new atomic age.

We who are in Australia seem to be faced today with a new paradox. The original inhabitants of this country had lived for thousands of years in a state of loving closeness to nature, content with the most meagre material possessions. Throughout their struggle for existence these men had felt certain that, despite disease, drought, and natural catastrophes, the continued existence of men, animals, and trees was assured for all eternity; for they believed that all living organisms were a part of the total life of a living and eternal earth. When the Europeans came to Australia, they brought with them the first plants that could be cultivated and the first animals that could be domesticated. They inaugurated a modern age of high technological progress and of great engineering works. Within a few generations of the first white settlements, Australia became a country with a fully-developed twentieth-century material civilization, and could boast about possessing one of the "highest standards of living" in the world. The Christian faith and a scientifically accurate view of the universe replaced what had been felt by many of the first white invaders to be a confused mass of "crass superstitions" created by the "lowest minds" of the "most miserable race on earth". And yet these revolutionary, and on the whole most beneficial, changes, which today assure all modern Australians, both dark and white, of ample food, a good standard of health, and the continuing promise of most gratifying material progress in every sphere, do not seem to have brought with them a commensurate

increase in human happiness. It is an unfortunate fact that all Australians now have come to share the fears, the doubts, and the strong sense of disillusionment of that convenient present-day fictitious personage, the "Common Man", wherever he is to be found on the globe.

3. THE POSING OF A QUESTION

Our modern age sadly lacks that vital sense and deep conviction of contact with verities and values passionately believed to be eternal. As a result, many, if not most of us, feel that we have lost something that our forefathers once possessed - a faith which began where knowledge derived from the senses and the intellect had reached its final limits,²⁹ a faith that can properly be described as "the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen".³⁰ It seems certain that the battle between Science and Religion which began in the nineteenth century has been responsible in a very large degree for the feelings of psychological malaise in our own twentieth-century communities. For it is when religion and science begin to quarrel that a community largely loses its former sense of integration with the universe around it. However much superior critics may smile at the simple religious concepts of "the primitive peoples", the fact remains that the many modern attempts made to set up material progress as the highest and most noble goal of human endeavour, and to provide a completely adequate and satisfying substitute for religion in explanations of the universe formulated purely in terms of mathematical equations, have so far given few people any sense of real security in the present time, or any hope of a more humane world in the future.

Today modern civilized man is surrounded by material possessions of a variety undreamed of by previous civilizations, and has his future protected by the elaborate social service machinery of the modern Welfare State. But though his imagination is

in danger of being blinded by batteries of scientific floodlights, which purport to rend the veils off all the mysteries of mind, matter, and energy that were shrouded in darkness from his forebears, modern civilized man seems to have gained no real feeling of security in the Brave New World of his own creation. Behind the brilliance of human achievement lies the persistent fear that the earth on which man lives, that earth which was born of a star at the beginning of Time, may one day, at the pressing of a button by some lunatic hand, dissolve into radio-active star-dust in an unimaginable catastrophe of heat, blast and fire.

Perhaps even civilized man could improve his prospects of a more secure future by adopting some of the concepts of toleration and cooperation on which the aboriginal Australians based their social and political systems. It seems certain that modern man would regain much of his lost emotional happiness, if he could once more be shown a way of linking his Time-limited existence with the riches and truths of Eternity by means of a faith formulated in terms that harmonized with a scientifically-validated view of the universe. Cynics who look at the blood-stained pages chronicling the rise and establishment of the world's great religions will have little difficulty in deriving from them a wealth of arguments against that black fanaticism and intolerance that have so often been generated by the human organizations set up to propagate and to maintain even the noblest faiths. Yet can science on its own really penetrate to the final and vital mysteries of mind, matter, and energy that determine human well-being? Can the notions of good and evil be determined, defined, weighed, and measured by abstract mathematical, physical, or chemical formulae? Is it possible to prove purely by logical reasoning or mathematical equations that men and women are "free beings" (in the full sense of this term) in their most decisive actions? Is the universe in which we move for a short span of time purely the result of blind chance, or would it be more correct to label it as a "purposive universe", sustained by logical and precise laws?

The answers to these questions are, of course, completely beyond the scope of this paper. I have posed them merely because I believe that they are questions which have both tortured and fascinated mankind since the dawn of human Time. It is my conviction that all human peoples on this globe have had flashes of insight and found at least partial answers to some of these mysteries - answers which have been expressed at best in faltering terms fitted to their limited grasp of the universe about them. The full comprehension of these mysteries will probably always remain beyond the eager grasp of men and women. But even flashes of insight and partial answers could help mankind in its further quest for greater knowledge of the ultimate and eternal truths. If modern anthropologists were to study societies other than their own, not merely in order to gain fleeting academic honours for themselves but in order to derive from their studies a fuller knowledge of spiritual concepts and norms of behaviour that could help their own fellows in their quest to evolve more enlightened ways of living together as human beings associated by a common destiny on a single planet, then anthropology, in the full meaning of this term, would cease to be regarded by its many critics as a study of dead museum specimens, abstract social theories, and neat, cold, and boring dissections of human institutions: anthropology would blossom into maturity at last as the true Science of Man.