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# Features

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## Spirituality in Western Australia

*Guest Features Editor: Paul Stange, Murdoch University, WA*

*This feature draws from the one-day public forum on "Spirituality in Western Australia" organised in conjunction with the AASR Conference in Perth in September 1989. The first item by the convenor of the Forum introduces the subject and event. Additional written contributions were received from Martin Wiltshire, Brian Kyme, Josephine Griffiths and Enid Adam. The remaining selections are extracts from tapes of the proceedings, courtesy of Prudence Petford of ABC Radio and transcribed by Jan Bide of the School of Humanities at Murdoch University. Considerable adaptation was required and the Features Editor, Paul Stange, is responsible for errors which may have crept in. Though touching the range of spiritual life in WA, neither the Forum nor these contributions have attempted to be comprehensive or representative.*

## Probing the inner life of 'sandgroppers'

*Paul Stange, Asian Studies, Murdoch University*

In setting out to stage a forum exploring spirituality in Western Australia, I did not hide my conviction that the materialistic face of the state is counterpointed by a diverse, however publicly marginalised, spiritual life. In introducing these fragmentary traces of the exploration which resulted, I will touch on the sense of spirituality guiding construction of the forum and suggest my own perspectives. I speak as part of the community, a migrant engaged in meditation practice, and as

a professional interpreter of religion in Asia, but in this instance reflecting on my home context. I will also introduce the contributions and summarise something of what came out of the forum as an event.

Mention of the prospect of testing the spiritual pulse of Perth brought a remarkably uniform response: "it won't take long". The reflexive assumption for most residents appears to be that our spiritual pulse is so weak as to be virtually non-existent. The impression

that local preoccupations are predominantly material arises quickly for many visitors and is widespread within the community. Our self-conscious images, including those suggested by media labelling of ourselves as 'sandgroppers', prioritise physical pursuits. Sporting festivals, peaking with the America's Cup, bring our wildest publicly expressed enthusiasms; morality enters public debate mainly when connected to the handling of money. At first glance we appear to be complacent lotus eaters, dominated by material satisfactions.

The most common leading suggestions are that we inhabit a 'panel-van culture', lost in hedonism, preoccupied with beaches, boats and barbecues. The most dramatic times of population growth and public building have been initiated by the Kalgoorlie gold rush of the 1880's and the boom in mineral exports from the northwest in the 1960's. The European and Asian migrant populations, convict settlement aside, have been moved from the start more by the prospect of material advantage than by visions of new religious community.

Perth has never been termed a 'city of Churches' like Adelaide. Religious impetus nowhere traces into the landscape of European settlement to the extent so visible in many parts of North America.

Religious and cultural concerns are certainly not prominent in the ways universities carve up knowledge or politicians appeal for votes. Pragmatic utilitarianism dominates economic planning, educational restructuring and political debate. Even excellence of intellect is virtually absent as social ideal. According to Dawkins, Fremantle's Parliamentary representative,

the central purpose of learning institutions is to prepare us to earn so as to serve the economy. Our educational offering to Asia is construed as marketing, constructed to assist the balance of payments; migrant intake aims to supply labour and skills we will not cultivate. Economic values thus determine the complexion of our relationships among ourselves and with others. It is worth noting these features of our environment even though the objective here is not to probe why material concerns have been so prominent or why they may be growing. If public discourses and media images phrase life in increasingly materialistic idiom then economic considerations overshadow and implicitly repress other values. This recognition provides a necessary basis for reflection on our spiritual life. Spirituality and religion appear marginal on the surface, but if we pause to consider the terms of our exploration, we might reconsider the materialism of our environment. We may even see it as a mode of spirituality rather than a distraction. Whether we identify with it as another matter. There is need to question the opposition between 'material' and 'spiritual'. If it dictates a view, leading us to conclude that 'spirituality' is impoverished in our context, it is possible we are tacitly restricting ourselves to simple views of what the inner life can be. I do think our dominant public versions of spirituality are impoverished. They appear too flat to take in the richness of the inner life we can know through actively attending to what we experience within ourselves. But this is a matter of preference, not necessarily the best starting point for questioning. At least in inquiring into our spirituality we should begin by considering our environment

both as context and potentially as way.

Though perhaps privately holding otherwise, in public most people, including a remarkable number of local academics, maintain a crude reading of what religion is. They might deny the suggestion when phrased as bluntly as this, but 'religion' usually refers only to participation in churches and acceptance of uncritical belief; 'ritual' is understood mostly in its colloquial sense, as 'meaningless' rather than charged; and 'truth' is only a relative construct of human imaginings, not a mystically knowable absolute. Even intellectual inquiry into religion within this environment finds little credence, reflecting our leading values. Politicians and vice chancellors consider the study irrelevant; students who pursue it nonetheless find their mates asking, "what for?" Close examination of 'spirituality' should lead beyond such superficial understandings, probing practices beyond those easily recognised as 'religious'.

Spirituality relates to aspects of the inner life which are a facet of the human condition. Like the stomach in relation to material subsistence, the spirit is present even when ignored or unmentioned. It does not depend for its existence on our belief. We need not be technical, it is enough to say our 'spirit' is an aspect of 'life' within the body; presumably we can agree we are alive. Spiritual commitments are in this sense clearly expressed not only in established churches and newly imported religions but also through informal meditation groups and in unspoken ways in private lives. We can even begin by considering our spiritual condition as tacitly reflected through the implications of our whole social order. Much of what appears at first to

be a statement of our materialism, can be reread as revealing our spiritual temperament.

Anthropology directs us to read between lines when exploring religious practices. Identification of tacit convictions leads us to interpret religion through how people act rather than only by commitment to textually defined orthodoxies. Directing the same style of reflection to our context we can ask seriously, not just tongue in cheek, whether the America's Cup represented a 'cargo cult'. It did demonstrate how people here imagine their hopes will be fulfilled. With feverish anticipation, business and government focussed on the creation of marinas and hotels, convinced that these preparations provided a platform for the influx of wealth. Bond was on the crest of a wave, exemplar of what could be attained, a guru at the apex of a great pyramid game.

The local superheroes, glamour capitalists, are easily read as cult figures. Bond & Co. inscribe their identity in popular imagination through media their cohort controls; on the physical landscape, through buildings, marinas and billboards. Ordinary people are preoccupied with these billionaires as they might be by royalty. Politicians vie for headlines and sports heroes surface momentarily, but achievement of wealth captures more enduring imagination. Spiritual virtue in itself is unconceived; teachers who refer to it can hardly appear in public discourse except as materialistic entrepreneurs. On the other hand public aspirations focus on exemplary capitalists. Are our spiritual gurus capitalists or are capitalists the teachers we tacitly really follow?

Behind the recent and now threat-

ened Bond cult stand several decades of millennially tinged tradition. Court's government projected a rosy future based on mineral exports financed from abroad, conveying an ingrained tradition shaped by residual colonialism. In colonial systems the arbiters of wealth and power lie outside dependent states, resting on the sanction of overseas interests; if once the queen, now international financial markets. When the rituals of presentation (control of labour) are proper, all good things (our credit rating) come through the largesse (capital investment) of superior forces from 'beyond'. In government, business or universities one underlying conviction is that success depends on the magic buttons of marketing. This implicit conviction about what finally matters relates not just to political and economic success, but also to what people widely believe will 'work' to make life meaningful.

Anthropologists are prone to emphasise that Melanesian movements fail to grasp the 'true' mechanism of capitalism. Cargo cultists focus on the arrival of wealth rather than its generation from a productive infrastructure. Thus it is argued they have grasped only a fragment of the 'hidden secret' of European power that they sought. But Melanesian perceptions may strike closer to the bone than we want to think, grasping our myth as we actually hold it rather than as we think we do.

We do respond to money at a visceral level. Theoretically we know it is a symbolic medium of exchange, but its logic is overriding, as though it is 'really real'. While we believe we are guided by rationality in organisation, efficiency in enterprise and equality and freedom in social practice, our more deeply engrained tacit beliefs in patron-

age and essentially magical invocations, rituals of dress and presentation, may be what we act on as a basis for success. Most people act as though money is itself 'real', they thus can be said to believe in, to have faith in it. We can say quite seriously that the complex of convictions relating to it are our tacit religion.

In traditional Java, as in most Asian cultures, land forms and urban constructions provide clues to the spiritual values of its people. Monumental temples constituted an effort to capture natural powers, those present also in the sacred sites embedded within the landscape. Spiritual orientations were interwoven with material expression not only in ritual, text and art, but also in architecture, in the reworking of inhabited space. Cities like Hue, Kyoto or Yogyakarta and temples like Borobudur and Angkor were statements designed to ensure convergence of temporal and spiritual power. They self-consciously wedded human social focus, material construction and spiritual purposes—as did medieval cathedrals. In Java court complexes were designed to focus and protect magical power, providing space for the sacred as a focus of social life.

In Perth's new city core steel and glass celebrate gambling, banking and mineral exploitation. When visitors leave the airport they pass the Belmont racecourse and the first striking building is a gleaming casino. On the horizon they see the skyline of central Perth, eagerly emulating an international megalopolis. Dense skyscrapers selfconsciously speak to other urban landscapes rather than the nature they inhabit, the land they occupy or the people they serve. The immense space we occupy is deliberately ignored;

buildings insulate us from rather than harmonising with their environment. Our most dramatic constructions proclaim the importance of the banks and businesses which occupy them. They are testaments to the prestige of their builders, the venture capitalists.

In Fremantle, where the settler past is still evident as remnant or replica, the sacred geography, especially if viewed from above, is dominated by prisons. These focal constructions sit on the power points which in other contexts might be palaces, churches or in Washington the Pentagon. Our oldest treasured building is the Roundhouse; our most massive construction the still employed convict Goal. The 'sacred' buildings of our old city are walls designed to imprison—first, to our shame still, the Aboriginal population and then the convicts. The great walls of many old cities defended religious and secular privilege from populations at large; ours enclose the original inhabitants to give the privilege of intercourse with the land, our sacred space, to migrants.

As the most isolated city of its size on the planet, a conjunction of factors contribute to our lotus eating mentality. The climate is delightfully mild, sporting facilities are plentiful, housing is comfortable, local holiday environments are pleasant. At the same time the extremes of warfare, crime and poverty prevalent elsewhere, seem distant and conceivably irrelevant. In many respects Perth exemplifies Australia, but isolation produces psychic distancing even from the rest of the commonwealth. Perth residents do not feature actively in the imaginings of eastern Australian endeavors. Those living here often ultimately reciprocate; accepting the paired liability of relative power-

lessness and freedom contingent on this separation. The focus of effort and preoccupation easily turns to the seductive physical comforts of life, all so evident and so relatively accessible.

Nevertheless, in reversing these materialistic images some people go so far as to say Perth is a 'city of light', that it is an especially potent spiritual centre. They affirm that there is a sharpness and clarity in the spiritual atmosphere that goes along with the special lightness of the sky. This perspective on the lightness and openness of the 'feeling atmosphere' is not one we will have if we focus on church attendance or the dominant institutions of media, business and government. It is the sort of observation sensed when contrasting the charged and busy psychic atmosphere of Java or Bali with the emptiness, which in the positive is an openness, of Perth. Such perspectives become more apparent if we shift focus, as our forum attempted to, to spiritual activities on the ground, away from institutions.

In fact the people of WA also explicitly express, cultivate and maintain remarkably diverse commitments to moral, ethical, religious and mystical dimensions. As in most contemporary societies, here we find belief systems and practices originating from everywhere in the world—we are multicultural in spiritual as well as social terms. Much more of what is clearly spiritual is also located at home in quiet gatherings rather than in formal institutions. Then, quite apart from the range of explicitly spiritual activities, it is possible that the social movements which centre on peace, justice, morality and the environment are acting as the most dynamic new vehicles for spiritual impulses.

A brief inventory of local communities can only be suggestive. Anglicans and Catholics remain the largest groups of Christians, but Eastern Orthodox, Uniting, Baptist and a host of smaller denominations are active, not only through traditional church channels. In Fremantle a major annual spring ceremony, for the blessing of the fishing fleet, brings out a depth of Italian and Portuguese Catholic commitment which demonstrates the continuing power of traditionally styled faith. Within the Christian community, declining or static traditional church attendance has been partly balanced by home prayer groups, experimental therapeutic sessions and born again revivalism. There has probably been more change in public perception of what is normative, as people openly admit inactivity now, than in depth of genuine popular commitment.

Established monastic communities, beginning with New Norcia, do continue to maintain Christian contemplative practices. When Father Bede Griffiths visited, expounding his synthesis of Christianity and yoga, audiences of over five hundred attended, ongoing workshops continue and a scattering of followers continue to visit his Benedictine ashram in India. In several local Anglican congregations there are followers of Muktananda's style of meditation. Fringe elements such as the Universal Brotherhood, the Church of the Mystic Christ and the Liberal Catholic Church, all essentially versions of (sometimes heretical) Christian esotericism, have been visible for decades. The picture may be far from uniform, but there is no doubt truth to the impression that the boundary between Christianity and other beliefs has softened.

'Hinduism' in this context includes more than the ritual practices of migrant South Asians, who do quietly maintain ceremonies and subsidise schools of dance. It should also bring to mind the dozens of movements which are offspring of Indian gurus or yoga teachers. Followers of Sivananda's disciples, Venkatesananda and Satyanand Saraswati, have been active for several decades. In the late seventies Fremantle housed the largest community of Rajneesh (now Osho) disciples outside Poona; a large concentration of followers remains, though they are now less visible. Disciples of Ramakrishna, Sai Baba and many other gurus are dispersed through the community. These practices are almost part of what appears normal, no longer extremely odd, as they appeared to be several decades ago.

The Islamic community is relatively small and largely, but by no means exclusively, migrant. A residue of the so called 'Afghans', who came as camel drivers during the gold rush, remains. Malays from the Cocos Islands are visible in Port Hedland and Geraldton and have a firm niche established in Katanning, where many prepare meat for export to the Middle East. Sufi practices are not especially visible anywhere they occur. They do exist in Perth. The hybrid style of Pir Vilayat Khan, attracted hundreds to workshops a year ago. Javanese sufi styled groups like Subud and Sumarah have had informal followings for several decades. Both downplay or deny association with Islam, but maintain a practice resonating strongly with Sufism. Pakistani, Indian and even Sudanese based movements have more orthodox offshoots in Perth and some of their following are local converts.

Buddhism had almost no visible following in Perth two decades ago. There are now significant organisations among migrant Vietnamese and Thai and also a substantial local convert following. There are three well developed Theravada vipassana groups, informal Japanese style zen groups and three different offshoots of Tibetan practice. For the most part these groups takes the form of lay practices which do not emphasise ritual engagement but temple and monastic support groups are firm. Rather than concentrating on memberships it might be more important to emphasise the dispersion of beliefs around the margin of formal membership. The wider influence of Buddhist philosophy and practices extends well beyond the sphere of those who would identify themselves as 'Buddhist'.

This point can be underlined in considering the changing nature of spiritual practices generally. A large range of groups defy categorisation. The Seeker's Centre, Mahikari, Eckankar and others draw, like some already mentioned, from many different traditions. They would choose to identify themselves as 'spiritual', like Subud, without stressing affiliation with an institutional religious community. Assessment of spiritual activity is certainly complicated by movement away from traditional 'religious' categories into movements which equivocate about their identification with religions. This is only the first of at least three respects in which we can note a blurring of boundaries in our increasingly multicultural context.

A very large percentage of the people involved with the new (to our context) practices, float. In moving from group to group and 'tasting', many people

never firmly identify with one, but nevertheless have been touched. The pool of those who have engaged with a range of explicitly spiritual practices, but who do not identify strongly with any one, is much larger than the membership of individual groups. While this is a sign which may be worrisome from the vantage point of particular organisations, if we read it as an indication of general commitment to spiritual practices it need not be seen in the negative.

A third factor which complicates assessment of spiritual change is that so many expressions are not necessarily explicitly spiritual. Daoist notions filter through acupuncture and Tai Chi, or other martial arts practices, though many who undertake them do not think of themselves as 'Daoist'. Senator Valentine was elected to office on an anti-nuclear stance. She is open about how her Quaker commitment connects with her social concerns and many of her active supporters are explicit about their spiritual concerns. On a variety of fronts the campaign to save the forests and the environmental movement generally intersect with spirituality. Obviously in gauging the spiritual pulse of Perth we cannot be confined to observations about relative church and casino attendance.

In fourteen years of exploring religion in Perth universities I have noted a distinct shift in attitudes to spirituality. No doubt my 'sample' is highly self selecting, skewed by restriction to those studying religion whom I encounter. Nevertheless I have no doubt that the atmosphere has changed; much that was problematic now comes as second nature. Though issues of spirituality, qua issues, seemed more prominent in the seventies than now, substantive change has percolated beneath the

surface. Twenty years ago eco-activism seemed to be on the lunatic fringe and it is now becoming mainstream, even being appropriated by the media and politics. Similarly, though there is less drama associated with it, practices of meditation can be spoken of publicly now without great static. What recently seemed weird has become, not quite normal, but at least conceivable.

Suspicion that spirituality is widening and deepening, but in tacit and often invisible ways, fed into the forum. It was a one day public event, held on September 30th 1989, separate from but in conjunction with the annual conference of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions in Perth. The idea was floated one year beforehand, during early planning meetings for the conference. Its objectives included: connecting local religious studies more strongly to the range of communities of religious and spiritual practice, providing extra incentive for colleagues from elsewhere to attend, and working to publicly counter the predominantly materialistic image of our society by exposing the range of practices present.

The day was organised around three sessions. The first focussed on 'overview perspectives', drawing on academics who write on religion; the second dealt with 'pastoral views', being addressed by leaders of Christian, Buddhist and Muslim groups; the third explored 'community practices', touching indigenous, feminist and ecological aspects of local practice. It was quite clear at all stages that the forum could not consider all aspects of local practice, provide balanced representation according to notions of relative significance or for that matter even touch on all significant groups. Even to have indicated

what was excluded, as the structure of the event did implicitly, is a revelation of the range of practices actively followed within the community.

The informal extracts which follow are useful. In exposing the range of local practices, they are evidence in themselves of what is happening. Some, such as the overviews by Enid Adam or Brian Kyme, can be read as academic treatments; most are best read as instructive documentation. Many of the most useful points from discussion are lost in this record. In the forum Phillip Carrier made instructive comments about practices stimulated by Father Bede Griffiths and two moderators, Rev Bill Loader of Murdoch's School of Theology, and Dr Will Christensen, from the School of Social Sciences at Curtin, are not represented. In any case written extracts communicate little of the spiritual vitality demonstrated in the presentations by Ken Colbung on Aboriginal spirituality, Ajahn Jagaro on Theravada Buddhism and Ibrahim Abdullah on Islam. Sister Veronica Brady on our materialism, Nado Aveling on feminist witchcraft and Paul Llewellyn on eco-activism all made stronger contributions through discussion than what comes through in notes included here.

Each session was led by a moderator, who introduced three or four panelists. Altogether the participants were a remarkably distinguished group, each is significant in their own context and most are very well known in WA. The speakers spoke briefly and exchanged views, then discussion drew from the floor as well. About eighty people were present, some for only part of the day. While not sharply focussed, discussion was active and informative. We did not focus intensively on the range or nature

of different commitments and practices, at least not in the stocktaking sense we might have, but did bring an unusual diversity of perspectives into the open.

It was not the sort of inquiry from which sharp conclusions can be drawn, but several observations come to mind. The local Christian community, at least as represented, demonstrates an openness and a self critical edge, and is stretching in several directions at once. Bishop Brian Kyme and Rev Bill Loader showed sensitivity to the ground swell of changing modalities of spirituality within the churches, and respect for the integrity of spirituality beyond their spheres. Veronica Brady pushes at the social conscience of Christian faith, in the forum as in her wider public role. Josephine Griffiths speaks here of the depth of movement beyond gender constraints in the church. Phillip Carrier clarified in the forum that many remain Catholics and are yet attracted to new styles of meditation, open to the convergences between their faith and others.

The forum also made clear how mature and grounded Buddhism and Islam are now in WA. Spokespeople like Jagaro and Abdullah are both Australian born converts but carry their adopted spirituality with total comfort. In them there is not the slightest sense of affectation, as there often is with acquired beliefs. Instead their practices are thoroughly domesticated, obviously profoundly interiorised rather than mouthed. In this respect their discussions, informative as they were in other respects too, were most vital as demonstrations that the clearly conscious core of those practices is present here. These faiths are obviously lived deeply by local people, not existing as only a residue of something brought from

elsewhere, or as shallow imitation. This mature depth would have been much more difficult to imagine several decades ago.

Ken Colbung was a powerful demonstration by his presence. He articulated the cohesiveness and power of Aboriginal spiritual sensibility, demonstrating it as a continuing living presence even inside the city now occupying the land which breathed his ancestors. His message is received much more clearly now than it could have been some years ago. In part this reflects changes in our idiom, which now colloquially allows mention of vibrations, something not 'knowable' in our language until recently. As an observer it is difficult to factor out my own gradually growing understanding, but my impression is very strongly that the qualities of local Aboriginal spirituality, long ago pronounced unreal at root or already dead, are not only transparently vital, but even beginning to reach beyond the Aboriginal community with lucid force.

A decade ago a series of Confests of the Down to Earth Movement were held in the forests of the southwest. Thousands attended and in them local alternative spiritual practices were juxtaposed with each other and with other wings of the local subculture. In 1979 several dozen organizations were represented in a gathering at the Point Walter youth recreation camp in the city, testing consciousness of spiritual process beyond the boundaries of groups. When Ken Colbung spoke at the Nanga confest he clearly recognised a general affinity between Aboriginal and Down to Earth impulses. He did not see a connection between Aboriginal spirituality and the new meditation movements then, but I suspect does now. At Point Walter only active follow-

ers came, the leaders of most movements were not interested in the inter-sections which make them part of a larger process, in this instance leading figures engaged in a congenial atmosphere.

Insofar as the forum is an indication, the limits of openness were most tested by presentation of witchcraft and eco-activism as modes of spirituality. Paul Llewellyn, standing for Parliament as a candidate for the Green Alliance, commented on spirituality within the environment in terms which could resonate deeply. Notable groups of those associated with clearly religious modes of spirituality, were not interested in engaging with Nado Aveling. She boldly and simply put herself on record, aiming to clear the air of significant misconceptions about feminist witchcraft. Some of those who might have been instructed chose to depart.

The last session focussed on prac-

tices relating to the earth, but connections of that sort were not drawn out, nor were threads between the three sessions of the forum explored at length. Whatever the limitations, my impression from the exchanges is of increasing openness. Differences between groups were not obscured, but people appear to recognise the authenticity of other practices more than they would have years ago. The speakers presented an overview of diversity and demonstrated consciousness of significant common purpose. They thus confirm that as people, whatever the social emphasis in our environment, there are remarkably varied and vital practices on the ground in WA. Spirits are awake and moving, even if at times through unpredicted channels, rather than as uniformly asleep as our initial impressions allow.

## Comments on the extreme west

*Martin Wiltshire, Religious Studies, WACAE*

Perth is a mini-metropolis, just over one million in size; it is geographically isolated and has the characteristics which reflect this situation. These include a multi-cultural base, Italian, Vietnamese, and other groups; religious pluralism, as evident in the Church notices in the weekend newspapers; a tendency to produce both 'liberal' and 'fundamentalist' sects; outside Perth, in the greater WA, the population is so small, widely-distributed and sparse as not to constitute any major non-Aboriginal spiritual or socio-

religious trend worth cataloguing.

People in the rural sectors display typical small country-town attitudes—they are extremely conservative in their religion. The country sector is unlike that of Queensland. There the rural population represents a considerable proportion of the population and are therefore a powerful lobbying group, with shared interests based on a long-established farming community, hence the power and success of the National Party there. The kind of fundamentalism we have in Queensland would be

widespread in WA too, but it does not have a sufficiently broad infra-structure. The greater proportion of the state's population is confined to a single urban conurbation.

WA is also distinct in other respects. It is by far the largest state and the only one to traverse the south to the north. Therefore, it takes in a wide range of terrain and climate, making for a diversity of economic activities: mining, logging, fishing, dairy and arable farming and tourism. Compared with the other states it is relatively unfarmed, especially in the northwest where many species of flora (and fauna) are being discovered for the first time.

It may be an accident that Ben Elton (the author of *Stark* i.e. *Star-Ark* = Noah's Ark) has a girlfriend who lives in Fremantle and therefore centres his book on WA but nevertheless WA is highly conducive to 'secret or covert operation', due to its size and isolation, of the sort he writes about, or the formation of separate self-subsisting societies. It provides the basis for the development of communes, such as the

Universal Brotherhood at Balingup in the southwest.

WA is also known as Australia's California. Why is this? California lies on the west coast of USA and was the last staging-post of the colonists trekking westwards. It consequently represents and symbolises the last outpost of the 'beyond the frontiers' and 'new world' spirit of America. Its form of spirituality, or pseudo-spirituality, therefore embodies that freedom of spirit. Its coastline faces eastward, toward Japan, the 'mysterious Orient', and the whole of Asia. This is not an empty observation - Japanese immigration into America is most evident in California. California is noted as the place of sun, prosperity and 'laid-backness'. Its reputation for these often belies the fact that it has a fair share of related concomitants: smog, poverty and a strong work ethic. California is the largest military and industrial producer per-capita in the US, and has undergone an economic boom under Reaganomics.

## Values and activist spirituality

*Sister Veronica Brady,  
University of W.A.*

As an academic, I am interested in words and in the gap between words and the actual experience to which words point. I also belong in a particular religious tradition, for good or ill. It seems to me that what the experience of the word spirituality points to is ambiguous. I am Roman Catholic enough to say that there is good spirituality and bad spirituality. What I regard as 'good' spirituality is based on

the premise that God exists, God speaks, God makes claims and that therefore, spirituality for me is not How do California and WA compare? There are some likenesses but more contrasts. They are similar in climate and economic prosperity, though Perth lacks access to some luxury items, owing to its isolation and relatively small population. I was shocked at what constituted million-dollar prop-

erty when I came to Perth - value is dictated almost exclusively by river or ocean views. Perth is a metropolis with a provincial infra-structure and as long as this persists it will always be reflected in its religion and spirituality. It lacks the pronounced class structures of more traditional societies, but it does nevertheless have a representative cross section of traditional Jewish and Christian structures and the better known new religious movements. It is only a matter of 'nice feelings'. God is not for me; faith in God is a matter of obedience to something living, claiming, liberating, empowering, difficult, the God who was crucified because of his difficulty.

I am also very interested in the critiques that have been made of the notion of God and of the attempts to define spirituality as an experience of, 'Oh, I know what God is' and 'I'm feeling good'. I think, speaking personally, that anyone who says 'yes, I believe', 'yes, I have some inkling of what spirituality is about', had better go at once and read Feuerbach and then Marx. Their critique is devastating; equivalently the judgement of the old testament prophets; that what many people call 'God' is the projection of emotional and social needs. But I do not think that is true of real spirituality.

If God exists, he is the burning-bush-god, the God of Job, who really says to him at the end: 'Shut up, I'm bigger than you are - the God, as I said, who was crucified. So spirituality for me, is obedience, claim and probably difficulty. True spirituality, I think, and I suspect this is what the mystics are on about when they are talking about the dark night of the soul, has all sorts of nasty consequences which

include the possibility of being crucified either literally or figuratively.

My distinction between 'good' and 'bad' spirituality therefore has to do with good and bad obedience to this living God. Not that good spirituality is denominational.

Indeed, I think the really active spiritual zones at the moment are very probably outside most of the institutional churches. There is a very strong spiritual focus at the old brewery site (for months, rebuilding has been stopped by Aboriginal protest there) at the moment, for instance. But in my view, spirituality has to do with obedience to the living God who loves and claims us and likes us to worship him/her and only him/her and there is a real collision going on at the brewery site between true and false gods. What is being claimed is the claim to reverence, to worship, and in this respect, we are learning a great deal from the Aboriginal people.

Another thing we are learning about here, is that God, the Christian God is especially the God of the poor. Partly this is because poor people are not so tempted to worship false gods. Real spirituality, in contrast, has to do with peace, the environment, the transfiguring of this world in love and hope by believing in different sets of values. It is thus an active sort of spirituality, political in the wider sense. Indeed, because I am a Christian, I think that God is political. Jesus, God, was mixed up in this world and in his spirit calls us still to liberate us from our false gods and our sinfulness and then to be liberated through others.

Where I see a spirituality alive and well in our society, therefore, is amongst the little ones, those who lack wealth and power, but who are hunger-

ing and thirsting after justice and are prepared to worship god in this world, not just 'out there' in an imaginary heaven. But the question, of course, is where God is to be found in this world - and this is where our distinction between 'good' and 'bad' spirituality becomes important. 'Good' spirituality, which has to do with the God who so loved human beings that he became one of us to teach us how to be free, how to choose to love others, reverence creation and worship him. 'Bad' spirituality, on the other hand, brings us to worship ourselves and our desires. Those who control the media encourage us to do this, I believe, and it is sad to see religious people giving their blessing to the worship of the false gods of power, possessions and mindless pleasure, and forgetting their prophetic role. There is an unholy trinity dominating our society: Mammon, Moloch and

Marilyn Monroe, an icon of the brutal and destructive effects of the pursuit of sensation and pleasure. Nevertheless, since God is alive, he is getting through, presumably to everyone, despite everything. True, the public life in this State is astonishingly destructive. Take a look at what is going on at the brewery, or at what we are doing to the environment or to ordinary workers and home buyers, and if you fly over the new farmland out from Esperance, you see the salt pans on the march. Our leaders, it seems, are astonishingly illiterate in spiritual terms, they have no idea what you are talking about when you talk about values of worship. Spirituality in WA at the moment therefore means hope that there are other values, courage to believe in the hope and love for and trust in the God who is greater than our selfishness and narrow-mindedness.

## **Spirituality in the Mainline Churches**

*Bishop Brian Kyme, Anglican Education Office, Perth*

My comments on the spiritual life amongst Christians in Western Australia have perforce to be limited to the mainline Churches; I will have to leave it to others to say something about those who have decided to move out along other tracks. The membership of the Conference of Churches in Western Australia includes the Roman Catholic church, the Anglican Church, the Uniting Church, the Salvation Army, Society of Friends, the Serbian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox and we might add to that list, the Baptist Church, the Churches of Christ and the

Lutheran Church, who join conference members in membership of the Churches' Commission on Education.

These churches share in common, faith in one God—as Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and, with the exception of the Salvation Army and the Quakers, they recognise baptism as admission into the Christian community. All of them meet in community for worship in one form or another. They all encourage their members to pursue a life of private devotion and reflection on the scriptures, and to express their faith in

personal and corporate witness, in ministry to those in need, and in concern for social justice.

My comments are restricted to those who take their membership seriously enough to worship at least monthly. According to Peter Kaldor such worshippers represent 25% of the Australian population and there does not seem to be any reason to suppose that that figure should be significantly varied for Western Australia. Such monthly attenders represent 48% of Roman Catholics, 17% of Anglicans, 14% of Uniting Church members and 21% of the others. There has been a consistent fall in attendance figures over the last 30 years, except in the case of the Roman Catholic church, whose overall share of the population has been somewhat boosted by immigration.

One suspects that Western Australian church members do not give as much money as their counterparts in other States, and also that the churches don't have quite as high a profile in this State as elsewhere. Unlike the churches in the Eastern States, churches in the West, although they received some help with the funding of Government chaplaincies in the earliest days, have not enjoyed the patronage of large landowners. You will not find in WA many stone churches of the kind in evidence in other capital cities and in provincial centres in other States.

The Swan River colonists were battlers and so were the original clergy. That eminent church historian Dr John Neal suggests that three factors have influenced the development of the churches in the West. The first is its isolation. The churches in the Swan River colony were planted directly from overseas rather than as outposts from New South Wales. For example, when

Western Australian Anglicans came under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Calcutta, the link was a direct one and not through the Archdeacon of New South Wales. Although a Bishop of Australia was appointed in due course, it was not until the diocese of Adelaide came into being that any meaningful episcopal oversight was given, leading in time to the establishment of the diocese of Perth, and other dioceses in Bunbury, the northwest and, somewhat unsuccessfully, in Kalgoorlie.

The chief factor in the isolation of the church in the west is a geographical one, with the Nullabor desert forming a great barrier between east and west. The effect of isolation has been partly a negative one. Christians of the west have not always been up-to-date on what is happening in the wider church community of Australia. There has also been a positive effect, in that church leadership has often, in my opinion, been enterprising and creative, and at times somewhat avant garde, in questions of theology, Christian initiation and liturgy. We have not been very conscious of what neighboring dioceses and Synods think of our ideas.

The second important factor is the vastness of this huge State, which has created something of an imbalance between rural and urban areas. The isolation of church communities in the bush has often led to a lack of pastoral oversight and the clergy, especially of non-episcopal churches, are often consciously aware of their isolation. The churches in Western Australia as a result are somewhat less cohesive than in the other States.

A third important factor is the existence of a large Aboriginal population. The Churches can take some pride in that many early leaders were

sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal people. They can be proud of the contribution of some of these early clergy, and of a number of religious communities, who have ministered effectively to Aboriginal people in the remoter parts of Western Australia. Whilst there are parallels with the situation in Queensland and in the Northern Territory, the scene has been different in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and in Tasmania which, of course, came up with 'the final solution' to the Aboriginal problem.

At the present time there is, I believe a growing desire amongst church membership to give a lead in concern for the needs of Aboriginal people. The net result of all these factors has been the establishment of a frontier mentality on the part of Churches in the west, and in our history we have had more than our fair share perhaps of mavericks, and more than our fair share of saints. The histories of the mainline Churches in the west are, to say the least, full of incredible characters and incredible situations. If you are interested you might care to buy a copy of *West Anglican Way* from a W.A. bookshop. Burke's history of the Catholic church in WA also makes for incredible reading.

On my episcopal travels I discern that there is, generally speaking, a strengthening of the core membership of local churches; while there is at the same time a steady loss of fringe membership, a loss borne out by the statistics. We probably share this trend with other states in Australia. The parish churches are no longer social and community centres, and there is an increasing emphasis on the religious aspects of church life. On the way out

are fetes and lamington drives, and on the way in are schools of prayer, retreats and opportunities for spiritual direction.

In the Roman Catholic church there is effective networking of those concerned with retreats and spiritual training. In the Anglican church an Institute of Christian Spirituality has courses for clergy and lay people. Wollaston College is affiliated to the General Theological Seminary in New York, and offers summer programmes towards a Master's Degree in Spiritual Direction. Examples could be multiplied.

At the same time there is increasing concern for social justice, and the Commissions of the mainline Churches meet regularly to plan and take united action on social issues. There has been a remarkable growth in welfare services at both central and parish levels, offering ministry to people in need. There has also been an increase in the Churches' involvement in education. The Churches' Commission on Education has aided establishment of new schools, more effective voluntary religious instruction (through ecumenical chaplaincies), and supported the re-introduction of general Religious Studies in Government schools.

Schools of prayer, and day courses on aspects of the spiritual life and the like, are enjoying increasing enrolments. Some of the important emphases include that on contemplative prayer in which people are helped to appreciate the kind of centering prayer life that helps make them more aware of themselves, and of God at the ground of their being. There was a time when we thought of Christians moving from vocal prayer up through meditation (involving the learning of a number of

traditional techniques) eventually to contemplative prayer. Today there is an emphasis on the capacity of ordinary church members to engage in contemplative prayer, of both the 'introverted' and 'extraverted' kinds spoken of by Rod Bucknell in his Charles Strong lecture at the Perth AASR conference.

Another emphasis has been on the insights of contemporary psychology. This has not only influenced the counselling services offered by the churches, but Jungian psychology, in particular, has greatly influenced the emphasis on self-knowledge leading to God-knowledge and back again to better self-knowledge. Another emphasis has been on a new kind of spiritual direction. In the past even those who had the benefit of a confessor have also gone to a wise priest who had the role of Guru or Master. Today there is an acknowledgement that we are pilgrims on a journey together; 'soul-friending' is encouraged and through that, people support one another to persevere and grow.

Another important emphasis is on small group life, and individuals have been encouraged to join groups, whether amicitia groups, meditation groups, growth groups or whatever. There there is a sharing of insight on the application of scripture to daily life, a sharing of personal difficulties in living the Christian life, and members are encouraged to be open, to minister to one another and to be ministered to. This is all a great encouragement.

But there is also a great problem.

The problem relates to the decimation of the fringe membership of the Churches. Today people are looking for a spirituality that works. The constant leakage from church membership is of people who are finding that an hour on Sunday doesn't make all that much difference. I think it was St. Vincent of Lerins who said that "prayer to the soul is what water is to the garden". People are finding that 'sacramental fertilisation' does not make all that much difference without the watering of prayer.

Those taking part in programmes of personal and spiritual growth and in schools of prayer, tend to be drawn from amongst young people who are searching for a path for their future lives; from middle-aged and older people who see their need to begin a second journey; and from those whose lives have been badly damaged by broken relationships or by pressures of the consumer society, and who realise their lives will disintegrate unless they can re-order their life programme and find spiritual identity.

The challenge facing the churches is to move on the decreasing number of Sunday worshippers who have no real involvement, into the experience of learning and sharing and praying together in groups smaller than the local congregation where relationships can be meaningful. Unless such church members find a spirituality that really makes a difference, the fall in membership of local congregations is likely, in my opinion, to continue.

## **Feminist Christianity**

*Josephine Griffiths*

*Sophia Directions Christian Study Centre, Perth*

A vital and exciting aspect of spirituality in the West, one which is not readily visible, is that which is flourishing among Christian women who have been awakened to a feminist consciousness. While it is true that within the mainline Roman Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches many women maintain their devotion to Christ and to the church through traditional modes, there are also a growing number of women who are moving away from the time-worn religious roles in which they have been cast. They have become critical of the patriarchal structures of the church which are often, also, anti-woman.

Some women who feel this way sense a strong call to stay within the structures and work for change. Women who apply for admission to the ordained ministry mainly feel this way. Within the Roman Catholic church, where the ordination of women is not yet a possibility on the horizon, women are feeling a great sense of frustration, powerlessness and a longing for change. Many such women are within religious orders and continue to live out their allegiance to the church through commitment within the order. These women seek supplementary ways to nurture their spiritual life, by developing contemplative habits of prayer, meeting in groups for prayer and sharing and by participating in ecumenical activities with like-minded women.

There are, however, an increasing number of women who have decided that the structures of the church are

incorrigible and likely to remain so within their lifetime. So they have withdrawn from membership of the organisation. While maintaining their devotion to the Christian gospel they can no longer, with integrity, participate in the life of the church. They must seek ways to express their spirituality, corporately and individually. It could be said that in following their own spiritual paths they have been led out of the church.

In the awakening of feminine consciousness these women have become aware of the oppressive nature of traditional Christianity, of the denial of their authentic human potential and the requirement to submit, in subtle and in overt ways, to a model for human society which grants superiority to the male and claims a divine mandate for the model. Acquiescence is demanded as the condition of acceptance within the community.

These women who are choosing to live outside the structures have strongly developed prayer lives. It has long been held that women, by and large, within the Christian framework, have better developed prayer lives than men. This may be due to personal prayer being the one religious activity in which women can engage without reference to men. These habits of prayer, together with a new feminine awareness, mean that women are discovering, in their relationship to the Divine and in their comprehension of the Christian story, a self-affirming rather than a self-denying spiritual stance. From this is emerging a new

form of Christian spirituality which is not formed according to the masculine model.

Since the beginning of the church, Christian experience has been synonymous with the experience of men. That this may not be an appropriate model for women has rarely, if ever, been questioned. The virtues which Christians have been exhorted to cultivate and the vices which they have been taught to eschew all bear a masculine stamp and are often couched in military language; they do not necessarily relate to women's reality. For example, the kind of self-denial which always puts others first may need to be encouraged in men, but women who have for so long been socialised into that mode diminish rather than grow in spiritual stature by adhering to it. With vices as with virtues, those sins to which men need to be alerted are rarely those which tempt women. Pride, the "cardinal sin" man may well need to guard against, but for woman there is far more temptation to under-rate rather than over-rate her ability and thus to sin by timidity.

Finding an authentic spiritual path through the minefield of traditional Christianity is for a woman a challenging quest. Culturally and experientially the Light of Christ is still her guide. All her life she has been taught *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and that she must distrust subjective experience, for only within the fold, obedient to the will of God as mediated through the tradition of the Fathers is salvation to be found. History teaches her that to

remain true to the experience of the Risen Christ while denying the authority of the patriarchy is a scary path and one which orthodoxy punishes and vilifies. However, it can be seen in the truest sense to be the *imatatio Christi* since He chose to be true to His experience of the Divine in opposition to the "traditions of the Fathers."

While some feminists believe that a woman can only be true to herself by leaving Christ and the Bible behind, there are many women in WA and in the world at large who find their spiritual identity within a Christian context. For them to leave Christ behind would be as damaging to their spiritual integrity as staying in the church would be to their integrity as women. These women are seeking others who have come to or who are approaching the same crossroads. They are meeting together, worshipping, praying and sharing. They are searching the scriptures and discovering with delight the all but forgotten feminine God language they contain, and an authentic Christology that is not androcentric. Now their spirituality is being nurtured by a rich tradition which has been suppressed by masculine Biblical interpretation and historiography. In this they are finding new depth, meaning, self-affirmation and a profound relationship to the Divine without either denying their life experience or turning their backs on their cultural heritage. Christian spirituality is alive and well amongst women in Perth but this may not be seen by the casual observer.

## Buddhism in Perth

*Enid Adam  
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The religious scene in Perth uniquely reflects the ethnic composition of its people. Western Australia's population of nearly one and a half million (1,406,919 residents in 1986), is characterised by its Englishness. With 14% of the population born in the United Kingdom or Ireland, this British proportion is nearly double the average for Australia as a whole. In the 1970s Western Australia was one of the most homogenous European societies in the southern hemisphere. British influence dominates all aspects of life, especially the religious. Anglicans are the largest Christian denomination, with 26.4% of the population. Catholics, with 24.6%, follow closely. But as Bouma and Dixon observe, although 69.8% of the population identifies itself as Christian, only a quarter of these people attend church even once a month. Christianity appears to have become a private, individualised concern, as Bouma and Dixon show in *The Religious Factor in Australian Life* (Melbourne, 1986, p vi).

Changes in the Federal Government's immigration policies during the 1970s resulted in the creation of a far more multicultural society. As Al Grassby states, in *The Great Immigration Debate* (Sydney, 1984, p 15), "Australians have 40 different ethnic backgrounds, speak 90 different languages at home and practise 80 religions." From this great variety I chose for my M.A. a research project in Buddhism, one of the most dynamic minority religions in Perth. Between 1981 and 1986 numbers of Buddhists in the state increased by 119%, more than

any other religion. There are now ten Buddhist groups in Perth. All are expanding, dynamic and provide a stimulating environment for those who have chosen to follow the Buddhist way of life.

As a practising Anglican, with parents born in Manchester, research in Buddhism has been an enriching experience. It soon became obvious that this religion, which had its origin in Northern India 4500 years ago, still provides inspiration for people today. The growing interest in and adoption of Buddhism by Westerners indicates the religion's universal appeal. Buddhism is not only an historical event but a way of life increasingly practised in the West. In Perth, Theravada and a number of Mahayana schools are all represented. Five groups follow the conservative teachings of Theravadan Buddhism, using the scriptures of the Pali canon, and six practise Mahayana traditions, including Vajrayana.

The oldest and largest Theravadan group is the Buddhist Society of WA, with a thousand members from many ethnic backgrounds. This society, remembers Professor Jayasuriya, began with a funeral. In 1972 the death of a Chinese Buddhist sailor provided the stimulus for organised activity. When a student counsellor at the University of Western Australia asked Jayasuriya to perform religious rites at the man's funeral he did so, with the help of two other lay practising Buddhists. This event made clear the need for a Buddhist organisation in Perth, not only to meet such emergencies but to teach the

Buddhist dhamma and practice.

In the following year Richard and Maureen Barton advertised in the local paper for other Buddhists to join them in celebrating *Vesakha* (the remembrance of Buddha's birth, Enlightenment and death). A large crowd of local residents and Asian students gathered. At the close of the celebration a small committee was formed with Jayasuriya as inaugural president of the Buddhist Society of WA. Four objectives were formulated: to encourage the teaching, practice and realisation of the Buddha's teaching; to establish facilities to aid and support Buddhist monks and nuns; to establish and maintain a permanent centre for the Perth metropolitan area and a Forest Monastery in the countryside outside Perth; and to foster association with other Buddhist groups.

These directives are noteworthy for their lack of identification with a particular Buddhist school or ethnic practice. From the beginning the society was multicultural, members having experience in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. The Forest Monastery, however, linked the group to Theravadan tradition and practices in Sri Lanka and Thailand. During the past sixteen years, with increasing support from both Asian and Western members, the Society has achieved its major objectives. Members met at first in the Bartons' house, then in an old house bought in North Perth where numbers increased steadily. The Vihara is now situated in Nollamara, in a former Anglican church hall. Even there the large premises are crowded.

In 1980 a small party went to meditate in Thailand and asked Ajahn Chah, Abbot of Wat Ba Pong Monastery for two monks to establish a forest monastery in Perth. Ajahn Jagaro, an

Italian-born, Australian educated Thai trained monk came to Perth in 1982 and Ven. Brahmavamso joined him the following year. In 1983 land in a secluded valley at Serpentine was bought for a monastery. The two monks moved on to the site, sleeping and eating under the trees until better facilities became available. Now the monastery is well-established with a permanent Sangha of eleven, including two women. The Sangha and laity have worked to build an ablution block, guest accommodation, huts for residents, dining and meditation halls and a modern kitchen. The importance of Bodhinyana Monastery for Western Australia is that it provides a Theravadan training centre and monastery and thus Australian Buddhist teachers for the future.

Linked with the Buddhist Society are other Theravadan groups which meet in homes to preserve traditional Buddhist customs. The Burmese Federation of WA was formed in 1980 and the Khmer Association of WA in 1984. They support the Sangha and join the Buddhist Society in the celebration of major festivals. A different and independent Theravadan group is the International Meditation Centre at Mahogany Creek. Built in 1982, it offers the teaching of Sayagyi U Ba Kin, a highly respected Burmese monk who practised Vipassana meditation. Two of his disciples and local lay Buddhists conduct ten-day retreats each month. A Sayagyi U Ba Kin Trust Fund supports the Centre. According to the brochure, people "from all walks of life, professions, religions, races, countries and cultures" attend courses on meditation which provide training in wisdom and insight. Another small Theravadan group follows the teachings of Goenkaji

from India. He occasionally visited Perth to conduct retreats. As he is now too old to travel, tapes and videos are used at meetings in homes.

Mahayana Buddhism is practised by four groups, two of these being Vietnamese. In the early 1970s early refugees were welcomed by the Buddhist Society and held their own religious observances there. But differences in language and traditions made it desirable for the Vietnamese to have their own centre. The Minh family of seven arrived in 1978 and suffered culture shock. They continued their family worship at the Buddhist altar in their home as their families had done for three generations. Friends helped to convert the adjoining house into a Buddhist temple. Mr Minh and his son conducted weddings and funerals, playing a key role in the Vietnamese community and forming the Vietnamese Buddhist Association of WA in 1980. They have built an elegant new temple on the same site.

In 1983 two refugee monks, Thich Phuoc Nom and Uach Phoci, were brought to Perth as religious leaders. But the celibate Thien monks did not fit easily into the lay Association and eventually established their own Pho Quang temple. There the Congregation of Vietnamese Buddhists meets. Two refugee nuns have joined the group and do social work. They are in the process of building a hall, the first building of a monastery complex at Marangaroo. Vietnamese Buddhists number roughly two thousand.

Another group, with Caucasian participants, the Zen Group of WA, has been meeting since 1984, their zendo being in a private garden in Mount Claremont. Although small, this is an active group of professional people.

Other Mahayana groups include the Foundation for the Preservation of Mahayana (FPM) based at Hayagriva Centre in Belmont. Led by Carol Davies, formerly a Buddhist nun, it aims to promote Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism in the West. Twice each year Buddhist professional people are brought to Perth to address meetings and conduct retreats. Some are led by Wendy Finster, a clinical psychologist and ordained nun from Adelaide. Meetings at the University of Western Australia attract students, members of the public and members of other Buddhist groups. There is a small support group in Bunbury.

There are two other Tibetan groups: the Origins Centre, led by Brian Shaw, and the Tibetan Buddhist Society of WA, led by Les and Margaret Sheehy. All three are ordained members of the Tibetan Sangha now following a lay path. The different ways in which the two societies have developed demonstrate the options available to Buddhism in the West. The Tibetan Buddhist Society follows the Gelugpa tradition in a conservative way, teaching the Tibetan language and bringing Tibetan lamas to Perth to give courses. Meditation and relaxation classes are advertised and attract many Westerners. The meeting hall in the Sheehy's garden is being enlarged to accommodate 60 meditation students.

The Origins Centre, of the Kagyu tradition, adopted a different approach, that of bringing the dharma into the work place. Cells of a dozen people with similar professional interests, usually in caring professions, meet in private and never advertise. The Centre offers few communal meetings but operates on a project basis. A Balingup retreat centre was built by

the group with the involvement of the local community there. Participation in the Origins Centre has decreased and the retreat centre is now run by the local community. Meditation and consciousness-raising courses are held. The Balingup Centre has taken from Buddhism practices those which are considered most beneficial, without retaining their specific Buddhist context.

In 1969 Ninian Smart wrote, of Buddhism and Christianity in *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Glasgow, 1977, p 692): "It may be that the ultimate future of the world's religions lies in the rivalry (a friendly one, we hope) between these two great

systems." In Perth Buddhists often see Buddhism's role as complementary, rather than one of rivalry or confrontation. As the then Governor of Western Australia, Professor Sir Gordon Reid said, in opening the Buddhist Society's Vihara Dhammaloka in 1987, Buddhism "clearly warrants the attention of all people of religious persuasion. It is fitting that, in the midst of a multicultural Australia in the 1980s, in the midst of a growing awareness - and recognition - of the depth of human talents, of faiths and of human endeavour which surrounds us, we should welcome this evidence of spiritual and ethical depth within our community."

## A Pastoral View of Buddhism

*Venerable Ajahn Jagaro, Bodhinyana Monastery*

I am a westerner ordained in the Theravada School of Buddhism, a practicing monk living in a Buddhist monastery and associated with the Buddhist Society of Western Australia. We concentrate on the basic teachings of Buddhism, but also cater for the special needs of migrant ethnic Buddhists. The Buddhist community in Perth is diverse. About ten years ago we started to have an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia, so we now have a few thousand Vietnamese, Cambodians and Thais. They are practicing Buddhists, but the way they practice is tied to their cultural heritage and each group has its own peculiar needs and spiritual practices.

Thus when we talk about the practices of the Buddhist community, I divide it into two major areas. The need of the traditional Buddhist is primarily devotional, you could compare it to traditional Christian practices. The other side of the spiritual practice in the Buddhist community here in Perth is to do with the people of western background who have an active interest in the study and practice of Buddhism. For this group the devotional side, of ceremonies and rites, is not of great interest. Their focus is study of the teachings of the Buddha, in particular training of the mind through practice of meditation, applying the clearer understanding that arises to bring greater

sense of well-being in their own personal lives.

Most of our effort and time is spent in catering for the needs of the western interest here, because we think it is closer to what Buddhism was intended to be. The Buddha had a particular emphasis and purpose we call spiritual. In the Buddhist context spirituality is seen as the cultivation of certain qualities within one's mind or heart which will enhance, help or be conducive for the person's realisation of truth, transcending of mortality, in other words attaining enlightenment. That is what the Buddha taught, all that he laid down was with that goal in mind. The practice of Buddhism, what we term the spiritual life, is simply to cultivate these qualities which will help us obtain enlightenment, purification of mind. Cultivating those qualities which reduce the three defilements—greed, hatred and delusion—is spirituality in the Buddhist sense.

Cultivation of morality is not a system of commandments, but of principles for guiding actions and speech, refraining from doing or saying anything that is hurtful to oneself or another. Cultivation of compassion, respecting life and generosity, especially struck me when I first came across Buddhism. It is a crucial part of spiritual training because through the act of giving and sharing we break through the self-centred views that normally bind the individual with his own pre-concern and separate him/her from the rest. This is a positive side of restraint. Restraint in regard to sexual relationships, not committing adultery and having responsibility for one's sexuality, is not just because there is a rule, but because one is a human being, not an animal. One is able to be respon-

sible for one's actions, aware of their consequences.

Cultivation of meditation involves training of the mind. Sharpening of the faculties, in particular of the qualities of alertness, awareness, and the reflective ability of the mind, is the training through which true wisdom can arise. This is the training of the mind through meditation as systematic techniques. We encourage this through the teaching of meditation, holding retreats, giving talks and encouraging people to practice meditation at least once or twice a day. Meditation is not only the formal training of the mind in a meditation posture, which some of you may be familiar with. The intention is to bring it out of that former situation to the ordinary situation of life, every aspect of life is encouraged to be transformed into a meditation by the cultivation of this quality of awareness. Wisdom in Buddhism is not "a lot of knowledge", it is simply a clear understanding of the way things are. The truth that has always been does not belong to anyone, it is there for those who can open their eye of wisdom. This is the basic teaching we give for most of the community that attends our Buddhist centre.

This is not of great interest to the traditional Buddhist. The great majority of the ethnic traditional Buddhist community would not practice meditation, but would make effort in developing the basis of morality and in particular, the very positive aspect of generosity and compassion. They rely on the devotional side, which we encourage in ceremonial activities. In this particular tradition we are a bit austere in ritual, but we do cater for this as a "useful means". Ceremony is not sacred in any way, none of the rituals or symbols are considered sacred. We consider them

as “skilful means” to encourage and develop spiritual qualities. One of these very useful spiritual qualities is the mind that is uplifted with joy and open through generosity.

We do have ceremonial occasions, when ethnic Buddhists gather at our centre in Perth or at the monastery, where the monks live south of Perth. They reaffirm their belief by ceremonies for taking refuge, blessings and chanting—all ways of helping people who are not able to sit quietly and meditate on a refined object. To sit quietly with four or five hundred people, to make their minds peaceful is very difficult, but because they have faith and respect the Buddha the monks chant. At the same time most ceremonial days centre around food—the sharing, the giving, the offering of food—first to the monks, who are dependent on the lay community. Monks are not priests but spiritual guides or friends. Because people respect what they are trying to do, they feed them. On special days there is

always open hearted joyful giving and all the different cultural heritages, races and languages, melt together. Food is one of the most basic things we can share, so we use that as a skilful means to bring out the spiritual quality in the community. In this way the Buddhist community makes an effort in cultivating spiritual qualities which help people realise their potential.

Because this is a multicultural society the language style of ceremony has to be quite neutral. The basic teachings of the Buddha needs very little adaptation to culture. It does not require adaptation other than being communicated in the language of the people, the basic teaching is always relevant. It is to do with the mind, with human aspiration for happiness, with potential for enlightenment. These are not limited by time or place. Ceremonial is dependent on time and place and we have had to adapt it to make it more appropriate for Perth.

## A local perspective on Islam

*Ibrahim Abdullah, Islamic Council of WA*

A powerful sequence of events took place almost ten years ago, far enough away from here. Inadvertently caught up in a war, I had the misfortune to be captured, taken for a soldier and paraded through villages. This involved stones, sticks and bits of offal being thrown at me, and imprisonment. Some experiences I will not go into—the outcome was that I was stripped of any sense of personal dignity. I was released with frustration, hunger and the trots. In that condition I stumbled through the city looking for food and a

room where I might get some comfort. Distracted, I was not paying attention to what was going on around me. Out of the blue I was set upon by people who quickly did a professional job of beating me up. I found myself lying in the gutter, surrounded by people who took pleasure in this—they were laughing. My recollection is blurry.

I found a place late in the afternoon. It was empty, but they did serve food so I went in and huddled in the corner. In that condition, feeling sorry for myself and far from home, I saw calligraphy on

the wall. It was on a black background with highly embossed gold cursers through it and I had been wandering that part of the world long enough to look at it. The first letter was "A". The instant I recognised the words and said them under my tongue, something dramatic happened inside, a spiritual experience. I did not "convert", as though from one thing to something else, I remembered what had always been, like something forgotten which comes back to mind by surprise. Underscoring its authenticity, apart from the dramatic impact it had, was that it was so damned unexpected. The army which had captured me, the villagers who threw sticks at me, the hooligans that bashed me up were all Muslim. To recognise myself as a Muslim was the last thing I thought I would do.

As Muslims here in Western Australia we try to put ourselves into situations of remembering. Every activity of our day can be conducted in such a fashion that it puts us into a state of remembrance rather than forgetfulness. The most obvious way that Muslims anywhere pursue this course is prayer. In the same way we punctuate our sentences to give them clarity of meaning, Muslims, in a quest for remembrance, punctuate their days and nights with the practice of prayer. You stop what you are doing, orient yourself, align yourself and submit in remembrance. You could visualise, as the earth moves and the times change that every moment somewhere in the world people are orienting to Mecca in prayer—it is an enormous power point. But points of power exist in a small way in mosques, a place where you submit yourself, and wherever people gather in spiritual endeavour. According to our

belief on the day of judgement every part of the earth where you have laid your head in prayer will speak in your favour.

Muslims have had a relationship with Western Australia for centuries. In the northwest our brothers from Indonesia have been coming and going, fishing and pinching trepang. The later part of the last century saw our brethren from Pakistan, the so called "Afgans" coming as camel drivers during the gold rush and for the explorers that opened up the Canning stock route. Significant groups of Muslims have just arrived here during the course of the last week. Small groups spend some time here, meeting with Muslims and other folk, with an intention of directing themselves. The way they do is like a walking university and sometimes they move on foot. Groups of people like this walk every year from central Africa, Spain, India and Arabia. People meet with a few others, picking them up to join the group and run off to Mount Newman. They might stay there for a while, then travel on to Port Hedland, then probably wriggle their way down the coast to Carnarvon and Geraldton, then back to Perth.

What they are doing, to draw a sort of analogy, is "stitching out a journey". They are linking up with places where their brothers and sisters have located themselves, and in doing that, reinforcing those centres of power and their own spirituality. It is a spiritual journey, the group is concerned to perfect practice, to seek knowledge, outside and internal knowledge, in the spirit of remembrance. They develop a spirit of brotherhood (its only English that makes them say "brotherhood" and "sisterhood") with as much sincerity as they can muster. One of the quickest

ways to bring buckets of sacrifice and suffering on your head is to step forth out of your normal environment and travel. Sometimes people go away every month for short periods. Journeys have an external dimension and an internal dimension. Ordinary people travel, meet and discuss the issues of practice together.

It may surprise you to know that this attraction of Western Australia has been discussed in many parts of the world. There is a consensus of opinion that there is something strange, something special about it. I have sat in that circle and people have asked me, why and what it is. Some people with perception, ability to sense things that are not apparent to others, have identified a certain vitality, a potential

manifest here. In a simple sense it is obvious—the number of people who join the faith here is multiplying far faster than in the rest of Australia. I get a feeling that this not only so among Muslims. Maybe it has to do with our isolation, with the fact that we are removed from the mad static, the fluttering in the atmosphere in other parts of the country. When talking about spiritual endeavour in the Islamic context, the organ of perception is the kalbu and it is like a hub. I have felt since I came to Perth that it is rather like the heart centre, a spiritual hub. Many people who make their lives a spiritual endeavour have journeyed here at difficult times, stayed for a period, gone through a transformation and then moved on.

## Aboriginal spirituality

*Ken Colbung, Nyoongah Community*

We forget that we all have a spirit. This special thing called "spirituality" is a feeling. That is what the spirit is, a feeling, an emotion. It can be a lot of things. It has sex, it is male and female; it has individuality, it is not just one thing. It can be spread all over the place in different things. It comes in animals, it comes in trees, it comes from all around us, otherwise we would never be here. Our sort of ritual is to belong to that, to understand it, to know it. So our stories, that we belong to and came from, and all our legends lead us to believe that there is a strong relationship to different trees, districts, animals, and people. We can have someone very close—it does not have to be a mother, father or brother—it can

be anybody that is a bosom friend, someone you can really rely on in life. We have spirituality; it is there for us who know and understand it.

We say we "belong" to a group so we do not highlight what we all have. I believe the spirit is basically the same. I stick to my Nyoongah concepts and beliefs but I have travelled to see the Yamagi and different Aboriginal groups around and shared with them. That sharing has always been a spiritual emotive thing we have when we are carried with the rituals. I took part in a farewell to a sister who helped set up an Aboriginal educational system and saw that all the things we do in ritual were acted out in this Roman Catholic mass. They were singing for certain

things, the same things that we do. It shows that we are all human, we all have a capacity, we are part of an animal life that is here on earth, we are inter-connected. Perhaps when you become a politician you throw that away and take a fresh course—you forget about spiritual things and become case hardened, you cannot understand why all around you people are doing queer things.

People say Aboriginals were here for forty thousand years. In 1967 they agreed we were human beings. This was an amazing thing. All along we knew and suddenly they realised—they are a slow learner group. We know that they are vandals—look what they have done to the country in two hundred years. For forty thousand years we were trying to tidy up the place and make things operate co-operatively, among the animals, the trees and nature itself.

We all believed in a sharing, in a relationship, that there was a pay-back. If we did not do the right thing then the good creator sent down something that showed us that we'd better sit up and take notice, some catastrophic events happened. Our legends and stories told us this and we accepted it. We did not say "why did that happen?", we accepted it as a basic fact of life. Here we were; we had to share with the animals. We could not go around with automatic weapons, mowing them down and leaving carcasses.

If we wanted a boomerang we did not get a chain saw, cut wood up, shave it into thin strips of veneer and then make a little boomerang we could throw; we took the knee of the tree and allowed the tree to grow. We took only what we needed to eat from the animal kingdom, only what we needed out of the ground. We did not take any more than what was necessary for day to day living. We were assured by the elders,

who had lived through the seasons and understood what was happening, that we should be leaving some for those that come later on.

Today it would appear that we do not need to do that. We have become a multi-national company. We take from this country, throw it over to that one, make it into something, throw it back here, distribute it around and then it becomes garbage. It loads up this place with garbage and we become a rubbish tip.

When the English came they said, "these people are heathens". They did not communicate; they did not know that we saw them as the second coming. They had been here before, they were sort of "second hand Roses"—when they were coming back they had to walk through the water and got bleached. We thought in walking through the water if you swallow enough salt water you become demented. It was never recorded how we saw the English; it has always been recorded how the English saw us.

They saw us as a despicable race who were very violent. Yet the first form of tourism was something like 2,800 skulls that they took back to England. To show people there what type of people we were they cut off our heads and took them to England. We would have liked it better if they had taken the whole body over there to let us see what England looked like. They saw what Australia looked like and a lot of them stayed—they are still here.

All in all Aboriginal religion is a personal thing, religion is personal to everybody; it is something you have decided. You may have been coerced in the first place with some religions but with ours it is a matter of saying that you desire to have something. Then a person who has served before and knows, who has studied a lot more than others, is there to assist and make sure

you understand what you want to become a part of. So people make terms, an initiation, a bringing together into the fold. A person must be sure. When other groups have come they have been accepted by our people; perhaps you should not belong if you do not want to understand.

To keep anthropology alive they keep students waiting for something mysterious. This is something to do with our framework of education now. The same thing applies with doctors. Actually we are all able to understand. We say, "I am sick in the guts, what the hell could that be? What made me? Did I get uptight because I got tired of that bastard sitting along side me", we can

become frustrated in ourselves. We are absorbing ourselves constantly in only one system, not having a change or holiday.

The system with our people was we could roam around. Being able to go from one place to the other was constructive. The creator put the different plants and styles of food we have, different seasons when they would be abundant, so we could move. We were not stuck in one little place like this, conforming ourselves to a prison. We get a little box and we stay in it. How many people know who their neighbour is? They keep to their business, I keep to mine. You can live in the street and not know who lives alongside you.

## Feminist witchcraft

*Nado Aveling, Post-Graduate Student  
School of Education, Murdoch University*

I am a witch and a feminist. It is now somewhat respectable to call oneself a feminist; to call oneself a witch appears deliberately provocative. Once I was asked which was more important to me—my feminism or my witchcraft. The answer must ultimately be "neither", it is a witchcraft informed by feminism and feminism informed by witchcraft. Until recently to publicly say "I am a witch" would mean I could be burnt. Not so long ago witches in Perth have had their homes ransacked, bricks thrown through windows and the usual vandalism. So it is still not popular to come out of the broom closet, so to speak, and say "I am a witch". Feminists have deliberately reclaimed

the word "witch" and many witches in Perth will say they are of "the old religion", they are of the Wicca.

I am a particular sort of a witch and thus do not speak for witches in Perth, but for myself, at most for the witches in my coven. Witchcraft is not an organised religion, there is no central power structure, there are no bosses, and, though I know some would dispute this, there is basically no hierarchy. Witchcraft finds a range of different ways of organising itself. Some covens have a rigid power structure. They might be headed by a high priestess, followed by a high priest, followed by a group of elders, all going through a process of initiation from 1st, 2nd, 3rd,

etc degrees. Other covens will have only one degree of initiation. Some groups of women who do not necessarily call themselves covens, will say "because I am a woman, I am a witch". It is all open to varying interpretations.

There are loose connections among the witches in Perth. We know of each other and sometimes join together for festivals. We may bitch at each other, going through periods of not speaking and other periods of joining together to celebrate festivals. By and large, it is a very loose organisation of people who share one central theme: at the centre of witchcraft is the symbol of the goddess, in some groups the goddess rules supreme. The symbol of the goddess is not a "big mamma in the sky", as though parallel to the big papa in the sky. Others honour the son of the goddess, her lover, her consort, and give him equal place. Still others see the god as marginally more important. There is no hard and fast rule.

The one tenet that binds witches together is the simple "do what you will" which brings us down to individual responsibility. There is no one to

say "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not". Provided it does not hurt anyone else, it is your decision, your choice. That does make life difficult because the onus of responsibility falls squarely on the individual, we are taking responsibility for our own actions. In that sense, and in others as well, feminist witchcraft is about empowerment for women, reclaiming rights to be powerful. For men it is about reclaiming their right to be sensitive, caring, nurturing and soft. Wherever we go we are responsible in a small way for having to heal the earth.

Witchcraft, specifically feminist witchcraft, takes the early feminist politics a step further. If the person is political and spiritual there is no sense of belonging only to the realm of the personal, it is also political and spiritual, they blend. When we celebrate festivals, perhaps at a suburban river beach, perhaps at dawn on a beach in Fremantle, the Italian fishermen who may be present do look upon us curiously, to say the least. Thus it is personal spiritual practice and political statement.

## Spirituality in Eco-activism

*Paul Llewellyn, Green Alliance*

To start with a somewhat historical perspective, the emergence of the alternative hippie culture of the 1960s and 70s related to ideas of love, one world and peace - essentially, people were taking responsibility for their concern about the state of the world. At about the same time, with the emergence of the environment and anti-nuclear movements, two separate spheres of culture came together as the

green politics movement that we are beginning to see now. It seemed when one became involved with the environment movement that problems emerged quickly and that they were extremely large. In many cases it felt disempowering to be involved in a movement which was always reacting, trying to stop this or stop that.

The environmental movement has progressed considerably; it now has a

maturity about it. It promotes a vision for the future, a vision of a society which has profound respect for life on earth and human dignity. The Green Movement is about far more than trees - although I did walk into Kings Park for my inspiration to come here. The movement has respect for the world, the grove and also for humanity. It recognises not only our responsibility for maintenance of the global ecosystem and world peace but also the social need for creation of democratic grass roots structures.

One of my own most astounding spiritual experiences came during a direct action campaign when I was put into the back of a police car and the door slammed. I experienced an existential chaos, being totally and utterly alone. That is one kind of decision people are making. I was reminded of this last weekend as I did a training workshop with young people attending a conference called "Pathways to the Future". These young people, largely from Murdoch University, were training to take direct action on behalf of the Penang rain forest campaign (to stop imports of Malaysian timber). Most of them are relatively poor, aiming to get arrested and put into jail with no notion of how their bail was to be secured or where it would take them. They had thrown their life, their whole being behind the campaign. I respected that and was moved by their profound sense of responsibility.

The Green Movement finds its most conspicuous expression in campaigns such as the 'no-dams' movement in Tasmania. There people used non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. People decided that they would take responsibility as citizens of Australia and they broke the law. There were a number of axioms stated. Non-violence meant not only not doing anything that was violent, but also that the whole conflict could be seen positively. The non-violent axiom was a positive approach to conflict, a separation of people and issues and a philosophy of non-harming which resembles the Gandhian philosophy. There was a remarkable sense of spiritual community in those campaigns, it was not just a political action taking place.

The same sense of spiritual community or "tribal affinity" exists in the environmental movement in WA. You may have heard of "the Great Walk", a walk from Denmark to Perth through the forest. I did not go. I was politically hard-nosed and thought "a walk is just a walk". I missed out on something - apparently the people that did go developed a strong sense of community, re-discovering their connection with the earth. It was an emotional and spiritual experience for people, contributing to themselves and to awareness of the forest.

