

Buddhism and Christianity as Indigenous Religion

John D'Arcy May

Abstract: For most of its history, the study of religions has operated with a distinction, often quite explicit but almost always implicitly present, between religions with written scriptures, systems of doctrine and wide geographical spread, usually characterised as 'high', 'transcendent' or 'universal', and religions in oral cultures, without scriptures or philosophies, localised, close to nature and centred around ritual, whose traditions are described as 'indigenous', 'local' or 'primal' (the designation 'primitive' has fortunately passed out of use). One needs classifications; of course, to work in any field as complex as the world's religions, but it has always struck me that this distinction is particularly arbitrary and artificial.¹ I was therefore greatly encouraged when I came across an article entitled "Aboriginal Religion as World Religion", written by an anthropologist who works with the people of Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island in Northern Australia but who has also made it his business to experience first hand the spiritual practices of Hinduism and Islam in India and Zen in Japan.² David Turner wishes to get away from "an evolutionary framework situating some religions at one end as 'primal' and others at the opposite end as 'developed'".³ This schema becomes more sinister when one remembers that "the so-called world religions are the imperialist religions – the ones spreading out to incorporate others from a centre of self-evidency – and are often attached to imperialist societies – the 'winners' in history".⁴ In Turner's view, "all religions are attempts at transcending dichotomous thought and polarized ways and are ways along the path to peace and order, though some are much further along the way than others...".⁵

This is an insight one can work with, and it occurred to me to do so by looking at the contexts of origin of two of the 'higher' religions with which I am most involved, Buddhism and Christianity. Each was originally

¹ This paper arises out of a lecture at the Asia Institute in Monash University and the Asia-Pacific Centre for Interreligious Dialogue in Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, in December 2009.

² See David Turner, "Aboriginal Religion as World Religion: An Assessment", *Studies in World Christianity* 2/1 (1996), 77-96, in which he reviews a number of his earlier essays on this and related subjects.

³ Turner, "Aboriginal Religion", 77.

⁴ Turner, "Aboriginal Religion", 78.

⁵ Turner, "Aboriginal Religion", 79.

rooted – and in many ways remains so – in very particular places, cultures and languages, very roughly as follows:

- Gautama Śākyamuni, 'The Wise One of the Śākyas' who was destined to become the Buddha, 'The Enlightened One' of the present world age, lived in Northeast India in what is now Nepal and the Ganges basin about five centuries before the Common Era. It was a time of profound social transformation, in which the existing class structure of 'castes' (*varṇa*, 'colour') was being subverted by spiritual movements which challenged the status of the 'priests' (*brahmaṇas*, Brahmins), and centralised monarchies with standing armies were subjugating the clan-based 'republics' such as the one in which Siddhārtha Gautama spent his youth. He was not a Brahmin, but belonged to the ruler or warrior class of *kṣatriyas*. He would have been familiar with the body of ancient lore known as the Vedas, which was handed down orally from generation to generation of Brahmins in Sanskrit, the 'perfect' language of the sacred, though he himself would have spoken one of the many vernaculars or *prakrits* (not, however, Pāli, the *prakrit* in which the only complete canon of Buddhist scriptures was eventually transmitted in written form). He may also have been familiar with some of the new, more philosophical and mystical teachings emanating from the forest ascetics and known as *Upaniṣads*.⁶
- Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth in Galilee, spent his entire life in Palestine under Roman rule and must have experienced all the tensions that such a colonial situation involved: cultural alienation, taxation, rumblings of revolt. He would have lived in close proximity to the Greek-style cities which were the visible presence of an alien Hellenistic culture, but there is no record of his having entered any city apart from Jerusalem; he moved about the

⁶ All this and more is vividly reconstructed by Trevor Ling, *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), especially Part 2.

countryside among artisans, farmers and fisher folk. Though he would have known Hebrew and was thoroughly familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, his native language was Aramaic, which he would have spoken with a Galilean accent. He may also have known some Greek. He was not descended from the priestly tribe of Levi. He would have been well aware of the divisions in Jewish society between the Sadducees or priestly class, who were largely complicit with the Romans in order to protect their privileges, the Pharisees or 'pious ones' who strove to preserve the Law, and the Zealots, who were prepared to use violence to remove the Roman yoke. He too lived in a time of profound unrest and transition.

The traditions initiated by these two towering religious figures very early transcended these local origins to become explicitly and self-consciously universal. It is astonishing to see, when reading the Pāli canon, how from the very beginning the Buddha was addressing the human condition *simpliciter*, without any limitations of ethnicity or social class (the question of gender is another story, but monkish prejudices of a much later time may be responsible for the way women are represented as a 'danger' to the male *saṅgha* or monastic community). Though Jesus always insisted that he had been sent to the lost sheep of Israel, Paul the convert dramatically expanded the horizons of the first Jewish Christians to embrace the whole world in principle and the whole Mediterranean basin in his missionary strategy. Just as the (in some sense) Buddhist emperor Aśoka sent out emissaries to carry the Buddha's teachings into all the kingdoms of the known world of his time (3rd century BCE), similarly the (in some sense) Christian emperor Constantine saw in the Christian faith the ideology with which to unify his empire.

In each case, this extraordinary expansion and adaptability is sustained by the conviction of the unconditional *truth* of the originating impulse: the enlightenment experience of the Buddha and the practical insights that followed from it, and the revelation that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of the Jewish people and the Anointed One of God, now come to save the world. Yet each phenomenon is irreducibly *particular*, couched in stories and symbols uniquely rooted in their places of origin. In this sense each, although universal in intent, is 'limited' by the cultural context which supplies it with its basic forms of expression through the ages, ensuring that each retains an instantly recognisable identity. Though undeniably universal in scope, each tradition subsists in a constitutive relationship with the cultural milieu into which it was born. By the same token, however, each can enter into relationships with cultural traditions quite alien to its own, with utterly different media of expression, whether linguistic, ritual or institutional. From this there arise two important points: Buddhism and Christianity are to this extent akin to indigenous religion everywhere; and they are *always* in a constitutive relationship with the cultural traditions of particular peoples and places. Without being thus 'earthed' or embodied, they would not be viable. 'Transcendent' religion, no matter how elevated and rarefied, needs to be 'immanent' in *somebody's* very particular stories, languages and rituals, no matter how different from those in which it originated and which provide its enduring media of expression. Another way of saying this is that the 'metacosmic' religion which goes beyond and relativises the entire cosmos of phenomenal experience is always rooted in and nourished by the 'biocosmic' religion more characteristic of indigenous peoples, for whom

the continuance of physical life itself in close communion with nature is the central 'religious' value. Buddhism may have gone to extraordinary lengths to neutralise and transcend this fundamental orientation to the cosmos, and Christianity may have rigorously suppressed it in its encounters with indigenous peoples and its denial of its own Jewish origins, but there is no gainsaying the basic indigeneity of both.⁷

All this, of course, has consequences for both missiology and ecumenism, which may be sketched as follows:

- Buddhism, in its long history during which it permeated virtually every part of what is today called Asia and is now establishing itself in the West, has shown extraordinary adaptability to many different indigenous cultures, even to the point of absorption and apparent loss of distinctive identity (when one looks, for example, at the degree of Thai or Burmese Buddhism's assimilation to those cultures) or any capacity to criticise the host society from a position of autonomy (examples would be the apparent capitulation to Shintō in Meiji Japan, which resulted in a kind of moral paralysis in the face of subsequent imperialism and militarism, and the appalling complicity of the Saṅgha in Sri Lanka in violent ethnocentric nationalism). Yet the worldwide movement of Socially Engaged Buddhism originated in Southeast Asia with the Thai Theravāda monk Buddhādāsa and the Vietnamese Mahāyāna monk

⁷ The correlation of 'metacosmic' and 'cosmic' religion is basic to the thinking of the extraordinarily creative Sinhalese theologian Aloysius Pieris SJ, and the designation of Melanesian and other indigenous religion as 'biocosmic' is central to the missiology of Ennio Mantovani SVD; for further references see J.D. May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003); *id.*, "Cosmic Religion and Metacosmic Soteriology: The 'Completion' of Interreligious Dialogue by Primal Traditions", Robert Cruz, Marshal Fernando and Asanga Tilakaratne, eds., *Encounters with the Word: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris SJ on his 70th Birthday* (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue; Aachen: Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio; Nürnberg: Missionsprokur der Jesuiten, 2004), 351-364.

Thich Nhat Hanh; the revival of *vipassāna* meditation began in Burma; there are numerous lay social movements in Japanese Buddhism; and Sinhalese monks have been prominent in both development and peace work.

- Christianity, though it retained strong elements of Jewish identity and even practice well into the third century, rapidly became alienated from its Jewish origins, as the polemics of Church Fathers such as Chrysostom show (the so-called Parting of the Ways in acrimony and mutual condemnation). It quickly assimilated – indeed, in its doctrines became assimilated to – Greek philosophy, but it also absorbed many elements of Oriental ritual symbolism, as is evident even in the letters of Paul. Yet, once it had become established in its dual identities in the Roman West and the Greek East – themselves, ironically, examples of thoroughgoing inculturation – it fiercely resisted inculturation into the traditions of many of the different peoples it encountered in its missionary expansion. The repression of Jewish identity in the Middle Ages, which undoubtedly helped to prepare the ground for the *Shoah*, and the demonization of Islam flow from this denial. While Christianity transformed its host cultures, it was also undeniably transformed by them, which is why there is such nervousness in both Catholic and Protestant churches about ‘syncretism’ and ‘relativism’ in the dialogue of religions. Liberation theology, initially characterised by a somewhat doctrinaire Marxism, eventually came to terms with the importance of indigenous cultures after being challenged by Aloysius Pieris in Asia and Leonardo Boff in Latin America. Feminist theology, with its critique of patriarchy, has further underlined the importance of the anthropological dimension of religion.

A more recent development is the emergence of what Buddhists themselves are calling Buddhist theology (variously referred to as ‘Buddhology’, ‘Dharmalogy’ or ‘Buddhology’ – my own preference, as it parallels ‘Christology’). Buddhist thinkers such as John Makransky and

José Cabezón, in conscious analogy with their Christian colleagues, are 'coming out' as scholars whose attempts to provide a rationale for the truth of Buddhism are inspired by their Buddhist allegiance.⁸ Following the lead of Christian comparative theologians such as Francis Clooney and James Fredericks,⁹ these Buddhist thinkers are trying to explore *together* with Christians the higher reaches of doctrinal development in both traditions on the presupposition that in each case human reason is being deployed to address similar if not identical problems. Some examples, which we cannot develop in detail, might be:¹⁰

- The *Trikāya*, the 'Three Bodies' of the Buddha: the *nirmāṇa-kāya* or 'manifestation body' in which the eternal Buddha-nature appeared among us on earth (which in Christian terms would be docetism); the *saṃbhoga-kāya* or 'body of communal enjoyment', in which the Buddha is manifested as a luminous cosmic figure surrounded by transcendent Buddhas and enlightened Bodhisattvas; and the *dharmakāya* or utterly transcendent Buddhahood itself. The parallels to the historical Jesus, the glorified Christ and the eternal Word, while not exact, are striking, and

⁸ See John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997); Roger Jackson and John Makransky, eds., *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); John Makransky, "Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections Toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions", Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions* (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2008), 47-68. Makransky is an ordained Lama and Cabezón is a practitioner in Tibetan Buddhist lineages.

⁹ See Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); see also Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: Maximal Greatness and the Doctrine of Buddhahood in Classical India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

¹⁰ For an initial attempt see J.D. May, "Creator Spirit: A Narrative Theology of the Trinity in Interreligious Relations", Declan Marmion and Gesa Thiessen, eds., *Trinity and Salvation: Theological, Spiritual and Aesthetic Perspectives* (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2009), 161-180.

suggest that there is scope for much further collaborative exploration.

- The *tilakkhaṇa* or 'three attributes' of all reality, namely *anicca*, transitoriness or impermanence; *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness; and *anattā*, not-self or no-substance. The Sri Lankan pioneer of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Lynn de Silva, set out to correlate these with God the eternal (Father), God the redeemer (Son) and God the sanctifier (Spirit).¹¹
- The doctrine of the eternal Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*, *Tathāgata-garbha*, *Dharmatā* and various other designations), the embodiment of Buddha in his non-dual essence, was developed to become the Buddhist cipher for absolute transcendence.¹²
- The figure of the compassionate Bodhisattva, the 'Great Being on the Threshold of Buddhahood', came to represent the ultimate sacrifice because of his (sometimes her) vow not to enter the eternal peace of Nirvāṇa until all beings have been liberated from ignorance and desire. The redemptive sacrifice of Christ and the gift of divine grace come to mind, especially when we consider the Pure Land traditions in which faith in the 'other-power' (Jap. *tariki*) of the transcendent Buddha Amitābha (Jap. Amida) enables us to enter the 'Buddha-field' of the saved, the Pure Land in the west.
- The foundational Buddhist philosophy of 'co-origination in mutual dependence' (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which dispenses with any causality other than the interdependence of all elements of reality and thus does not admit an external Creator, may yet be

¹¹ The only part of his project he was able to complete before he died was Lynn A. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

¹² See Sallie B. King, *Buddha Nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); the theme also runs through Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, and Griffiths, *On Being Buddha*.

correlated with the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing (*creation ex nihilo*).¹³

- The central Buddhist teaching that at the heart of all reality there is emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which is at the same time, non-dually, the fullness of all that is, may not be incompatible with the theistic conception of God as *ipsum esse*, the *actus purus* of Being itself.¹⁴

These apparent convergences open up exciting prospects for collaborative research, but as yet there is little evidence of relating such doctrines to spiritual and everyday experience in the two traditions, or of 'rooting' them in earth, nature and place; in short, of mediating the aspects of biocosmic and metacosmic religion common to *both* and correlating spiritual practice with socio-political liberation. When one contemplates the Vedas and the Hebrew Bible, one sees that they are utterly 'cosmic', permeated by earth and nature, land and place. Are the two traditions that grew out of them in India and Palestine, Buddhism and Christianity, capable of recovering these relationships to the biocosmic without losing that transcendence of the phenomenal world which makes their truth 'absolute'?¹⁵

¹³ See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁴ See J.D. May, "Nothingness-*qua*-Love? The Implications of Absolute Nothingness for Ethics", Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 135-150, with further references.

¹⁵ For a preliminary foray into this question, see J.D. May, "Rootedness: Reflections on Land and Belonging", Werner G. Jeanrond and Andrew D.H. Mayes, eds., *Recognising the Margins: Developments in Biblical and Theological Studies* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2006), 146-159, in which I draw copiously on Norman Habel's 'Earth Bible' project.

Let us approach this from another angle: There are those who, while immersed in Buddhist or Christian practice or both, sustain a profound relationship to indigenous Australian spirituality and religion. John Allan, a Dharma teacher for over 30 years, has been entrusted by the Elders of the Galpu Clan of Eastern Arnhem Land with custodianship of the Wititj or Rainbow Serpent Law of the Yolngu people, the first non-Yolngu ever to be given this responsibility.¹⁶ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, a Catholic school principal from central Australia, has given testimony to the hidden contemplative life of her people, the practice of *dadirri* or “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness”.¹⁷ Dan O’Donovan, like a latter-day desert father, lives a hermit’s life near Broome in the far west of Australia and has entered deeply into the practice of Yoga in India and the Jesus prayer of Syriac Christianity.¹⁸ From their varied and stimulating insights I have gleaned the following reflections:

- The recognition by missionaries and administrators that there was any such thing as Aboriginal religion and spirituality was slow in coming, but is now firmly established. Stanner was one of the few anthropologists to realise that there is something transcendent and sacramental about Aboriginal ritual and its relation to the

¹⁶ See John Allan, “Standing Up Alive for Healing People, Reminding Each Other of Each Other”, Toh Swee-Hin and Virginia Cawagas, eds., *Cultivating Wisdom, Harvesting Peace: Education for a Culture of Peace through Values, Virtues, and Spirituality of Diverse Cultures, Faiths and Civilizations* (Brisbane: Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre, 2006), 213-224.

¹⁷ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, “*Dadirri*”, in Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria, NSW: Millennium Books, 1995), Appendix 1, 179. I had the privilege of hearing Miriam-Rose speak to an enraptured audience at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne, December 3-9, 2009.

¹⁸ His contributions over many years to *Nelen Yubu*, the journal of Aboriginal theology and life edited by Martin Wilson MSC (which has now unfortunately ceased publication), have been collected in Dan O’Donovan, *Dadirri* (Kensington: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2001); see my review in *Nelen Yubu* 79 (2001/3), 13-14.

land.¹⁹ There may be a closer parallel between the Dreaming stories and the Buddha legend than at first appears. Siddhārtha Gautama grew up in a clan society with its consensual authority and tightly woven kinship structures. His 'walkabout' out of this society into the forest was not just an adolescent breakout but a conscious option for the life of a *śramaṇa* or wandering ascetic on a pattern well established in his time. It signified renunciation of status and possessions in order to search for wisdom, but it also inspired social teachings on the need to overcome the 'poisons' of aggression, greed and delusion which are just as relevant to today's consumerist societies as they were then. The story of the Buddha's enlightenment is intimately bound up with the *nāga* or sacred serpent which protects him in its coils; the Rainbow Serpent of Aboriginal mythology draws on the same archaic and tellurial symbolism. Buddhism in East Asia has always revered sacred mountains as privileged places for withdrawal from the social world and closeness to nature (in Japan the *kami* or spirits of the place are identified as Bodhisattvas and thus integrated into the Buddhist scheme of things). The Aboriginal relationship to the features of the landscape as the 'abiding events' (Tony Swain) embodying the deeds of Dreaming heroes has its affinities with this. Like Buddhist wisdom (*pañña/prajñā*), which underpins movements like A.T. Ariyaratne's rural development network *Sarvodaya Sramadāna* in Sri Lanka (translated by Buddhist writer Joanna Macy as 'everybody wakes up'), indigenous wisdom has encouraged Aboriginal people to 'stand up alive'.²⁰

- Pioneer whitefella thinkers about things Aboriginal like Frank Fletcher, Martin Wilson and Eugene Stockton have been trying to get through to their fellow-Australians for years that the

¹⁹ See W.E.H. Stanner, "Some Aspects of Aboriginal Religion", Robert Crotty, ed., *The Charles Strong Lectures 1972-1984* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 3-20; *id.*, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979).

²⁰ See Anne Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1996).

fundamentals of Aboriginal religion and spirituality are far more compatible with Christian mythology, theology and practice than missionary history, with its rejection of such cultures as 'satanic', would suggest. Art, story and dance are powerful vehicles of Aboriginal spirituality, and each has successfully made the transition into Western media without entirely losing its authenticity.²¹ But Aboriginal theology, too, is finding its voice.²² In what has been called the 'locative ontology' (Tony Swain) encoded in Aboriginal mythic structure, concepts such as the Creator Spirit are immediately recognisable as manifestations of 'sky gods' such as Daramulun or Baiame. The Dreaming as 'empty space' may be akin to the absolute emptiness of *śūnyatā*; the fashioning of the land by the spirit beings may have something in common with both Christian creation and Buddhist co-dependent origination (*pañiccasamuppāda*); the Law (*tjukurrpa*) has many resonances with the Indian concept of *Dharma* and possibly also with the *Ius Divinum* of Christian theology. The image behind *perichorēsis*, the mutual interpenetration of the Trinitarian Persons, is the ritual dance, which may well resonate with people for whom 'ceremony' is at the centre of their lives.

It is of course entirely up to indigenous people to interpret all this. Aboriginal writer Harry Walker offers a concise summary of the basic points I have been trying to make in this paper:

We all know that Jesus was born into a particular culture (Jewish) before he was recognized as universal. Jesus is both local and universal, born and risen. We would like to experience Christ being born in the Aboriginal soil, not just

²¹ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, for example, has created a deeply moving Stations of the Cross using Aboriginal imagery, see Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, *Australian Stations of the Cross* (Blackburn, Vic.: Dove Communications, 1984), with a commentary by Martin Wilson. See also Eugene Stockton, ed., *Aboriginal Church Paintings: Reflecting on our Faith* (Lawson, NSW: Blue Mountains Research and Education Trust, 2009).

²² See, for example, the Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Blackburn, Vic.: Harper Collins, 1997).

transplanted. It will be a great mistake if we do not allow any place for looking at our culture and faith closely so as to find the great contribution we can offer the Christian faith.²³

And the same holds *mutatis mutandis* for Buddhism's relation to the local and primal. But it seems evident that there is immense scope for mutual three-way enrichment vis-à-vis the 'exclusive humanism' (Charles Taylor) of modern secularity. Such an osmosis of religious traditions had no place in the rigid schemata of modernity, but post-modernity – if indeed it is a viable paradigm – would seem to offer unprecedented opportunities for interaction among religions and between religions and the secular by opening up a *global* plural public sphere.²⁴ If a global civil society is indeed taking shape, as many political scientists think, it will not be simply secular on the model of Western secular-liberal-democratic states. It will create space for a many-sided and peaceful interaction of religious traditions of all kinds, not just the putatively 'universal'. The renewed encounter of primal and universal, biocosmic and metacosmic forms of religion could fill the vacuum initially created by this expansion of global public space.

Author: John D'Arcy May is Associate Professor of Interfaith Dialogue, Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.

Email: mayjd@tcd.ie

²³ Harry Walker, "Goorie Jesus", Pattel-Gray, *Aboriginal Spirituality*, 107-112, 109.

²⁴ See J.D. May, "God in Public: The Religions in Pluralist Societies", *Bihdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 64/3 (2003), 249-264; *id.*, "Alternative a Dio? Le religioni nella sfera pubblica globale", Antonio Autiero, ed., *Teologia nella città, teologia per la città. La dimensione secolare delle scienze teologiche* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2005), 95-109.