

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

PART III
MATURE CONVICTION:
LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER SEVEN
REVERENCE AND RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY

[I]f it be held that the primary theme of man's existence is his survival as a species rather than, say, a concern for the truth, or the development of his potential as man, or the survival of his particular culture, then prescriptions of the forms of social organization will differ accordingly.

Kenelm Burridge¹

An older Elkin recalled that in April 1931, he changed a detached, scientific approach to anthropology, to advocacy of a 'positive policy' for Aboriginal affairs because of his involvement in the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR). We now realise that in important ways this statement was inaccurate. Elkin's prior attitude to his science was detached only in that he had left final decisions about policy to others. As a self-appointed proponent of anthropology's practical value, he had sought to show how it could have illuminated and advanced both the nation's and Aborigines' interests (Ch. 6). Nevertheless, he was right to recall that his involvement with the APNR was pivotal. As we will see next chapter, he first decisively demoted racial insights beneath moral duties *for a secular audience* for the Association's benefit.

What led him then to lay down both his racial expertise, and the cautious lessons he drew from it? Elkin later claimed that the year he had just spent in the field had revealed enough of Aborigines' way of life to justify a national policy based on psychological (and not ethnic) factors.² But by his own standard, this was not true.³ In 1929 and again in 1931, Elkin warned that Aborigines' capacity to adapt culturally to their new situation must be assessed

¹ Kenelm Burridge, *Encountering Aborigines: Anthropology and the Australian Aboriginal, A Case Study* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1973), 124.

² AP Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigine: A National Aboriginal Policy* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1944), 12–13.

³ For a more accurate aspect of this claim, that Elkin's fieldwork blazed a trail for more intensive investigation of the way Aborigines' 'secret life' persisted even after intensive contact with civilization, see Ch. 9.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

case by case.⁴ His policy direction came after his close study of only a few tribes. The new knowledge did not justify the national scope of his publicity campaign. And at the time, he appealed to duty to explain why his new policy ought to be adopted; he used science only to show how it might work; indeed, to argue merely that his new policy might not fail (Chs. 8–9).

The reasons Elkin changed his thinking were primarily moral and religious – and only secondarily scientific. One leading cause of his new decisiveness concerning policy seems to have been a resolution of long-standing tensions in his ideas about religion. In our exploration of his Masters thesis (Ch. 3), we saw that Elkin tried to show through historical speculation that humanity’s sense of a transcendent power had always been associated with an intimation of a fundamentally personal universe. His key source, R. R. Marett, argued that Durkheim’s account of the social origin of religion probably was not the complete story. In 1921, Elkin wanted to go further, and he emphasized those aspects of Aboriginal religion that suggested individual souls came into independent contact with a Being whose will was the object of their religious faith. Ten years later, after a year amongst Aborigines in the central Australian desert, Elkin revisited the problem: what grounds had he for belief in a free human will, finding its way in relation to a divine will? Again, Aborigines’ religious experience played a crucial part in Elkin’s thinking, and once more, Durkheim’s conception of Aboriginal religion provided his antithesis.

But in the religious inquiry he developed after his desert fieldwork, Elkin introduced the primitive men in the second act of the drama. In the first, he himself took centre-stage. The experience of a personal God to which he referred was his. The Aborigines’ quite separate, but similarly fulfilling, reverence for their sacred objects added to his already established sense of connection with all life, through a divine principle. After his second year in the field, he knew enough of Aboriginal religion to better respect its difference, and yet to draw from it stimulus for his own faith.

Ironically, a reason for the new confidence with which Elkin reacted to religious experience was his appropriation into his priestly ministry of Durkheim’s sociological insights. In 1929, while working closely with Radcliffe-Brown upon the interpretation of the

⁴ AP Elkin, ‘The Practical Value of Anthropology II: Social anthropology’, *Morpeth Review*, 1 (10), December 1929, 43–50, at 49; AP Elkin, ‘The Secret Life of the Aborigines’, *Oceania*, III, (2) Dec 1932, 119–138, at 120.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

data he had gathered during his Kimberleys expedition, Elkin popularized for his congregation the structuralist principles Radcliffe-Brown had derived from Durkheim. Then in 1931, Elkin explored in more depth the ways in which Durkheim's school of analysis could illumine 'the function of religion'. These enquiries revealed to Elkin that the incompatibility between his Christian faith and his Idealist project on the one hand, and Durkheim's sociology on the other, remained a problem.

Elkin persisted in his attempt to transpose religion's social function into academic discourse, but found it necessary to broaden his conception of that function. He wanted to show that religion and morality had real bases, which transcended any given society. These bases he established by integrating the evolutionary scheme we have called (in Chs 3 and 4) religious vitalism, with the historical hypothesis of the diffusionists. Elkin drew upon his previous decade's scholarship to renovate his cultural inheritance, such that his religious Idealism followed to a considerable extent from realist premises. He allowed the idea of evolution to shape the way he thought about God.

*Differentiating religious from sociological structuralism*⁵

Elkin was a structuralist thinker. He was so by virtue of his religious upbringing and practice, and his commitment to the worldview of his undergraduate teachers, particularly Francis Anderson (Ch. 1). He was structuralist in that he sought to integrate the moral agent into a unified set of spiritual and civic conditions, that is, into culture as we have defined the term.⁶ Such unity required that the individual be secured in his world on several planes at once. This process we have called 'cultural integration'. In the liberal Anglican integrative scheme Elkin inherited and professed, most fundamentally (ontologically), he was part of God's creation. On a social-religious plane, he was a member of a Church. On a social-communal plane, as a citizen, he attempted to articulate his various moral commitments such that they opened into a fellowship of all societies.

Elkin remained committed to a quite complex task of holding collective obligation and the free will in a holistic relation. His faith tradition supported his hope that religious

⁵ For this analysis of different types of structuralism, I have adapted the analytical scheme John Edward Toews set out in *Hegelianism: The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1841* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), Ch. 1. See also Chs. 1 and 3, above.

⁶ See the Introduction and Ch. 1.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

practice would co-ordinate the various planes of being so as to satisfy a spiritual yen for wholeness and completeness of belonging and purpose. He found both stimulus and complication in Radcliffe-Brown's adaptation of Durkheim's functional structuralism.

Durkheim represented to Elkin a disturbing challenge to this religious holism. Durkheim proposed that the starting point for a science of society was the exposure of the real basis of the human urge for unity and completeness. We can point this contrast by a figure of speech: Elkin tried to live structurally, and used his intellect as but one means towards that end; Durkheim tried to think structurally, and accepted that the attempt came at the price of a separation of scientific pursuits from practical or personal aims. The clearest and crucial consequence for intellectual life (and in the previous chapter we traced Marett and Rivers' interaction with this development) was that Durkheim's path involved the development of modes of social science in which agency had no part. One version of these powerful new intellectual developments that inescapably confronted Elkin was the thinking of his new anthropological mentor, Professor Radcliffe-Brown.

A structuralist view of religious ritual

Radcliffe-Brown first developed his seminal interest in Durkheim through his study of Aboriginal ritual.⁷ Rites were of special interest to structuralists inasmuch as they indicated how social actions bound people together in a fundamental way, suggesting that narratives and theories were secondary cohesive factors. Radcliffe-Brown believed that conscious elaborations of religious action were unreliable sources for the sociologist – ritual was his key to an objective approach to the study of society.

Radcliffe-Brown decided that the social significance of rites was not personal at all. Over the course of several years after his Australian field work in 1914, under the influence of Durkheim's *Année Sociologique*, and also of Marett and Rivers' application of social psychology in anthropology (Ch. 6), Radcliffe-Brown jettisoned the standard British evolutionary practice of speculating about a representative primitive thinker.⁸ He shifted his focus from the individual motive for change to the social meaning of action.⁹ Amongst the

⁷ AR Radcliffe-Brown, 'Religion and Society' (1945) 153–177, in *Structure and Function: Essays and Addresses* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 153–177. Stocking, *After Tylor*, 309–319.

⁸ For Marett's influence upon Radcliffe-Brown at this time, see *ibid.*, 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 309–319.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

Karadjeri, he observed, a religious rite could as well cause an individual anxiety as calm. The rite's significance was not to be found in the individual's subjective reasons for participating in it, or in his personal response to it, but in the relationship it sustained between his variable will, and a relatively constant, collective framework of meaning. Religion made society cohere despite the vagaries of the individual will.

Radcliffe-Brown indicated his embrace of Durkheim's sociology when he wrote that religion was 'the moral power of the society acting upon the individual'.¹⁰ Rituals made groups cohere; associated myths and narratives (which the rituals expressed and empowered) placed both individual and group in a fixed, reliable relation with the outside world, including the unknown. That is, religion provided a structure that encompassed the known and the unknown; that structure was subjectively experienced (when it manifested as anything other than normality) as confidence, strength, and belonging. Radcliffe-Brown's account of the cohesive function of kin relations, extended through religious symbolism, has been well described as 'structural-functionalism'.¹¹ The immediate uses of kinship – nurture, procreation, subsistence – were symbolised and generalised (that is, they were structured) through religion to render larger groups cohesive (such was their function).

Radcliffe-Brown, developing Durkheim's positivist lead, believed that social anthropology rested on natural laws. The laws of physics enabled engineers to build bridges; the laws of biology and chemistry enabled doctors to heal bodies; and, in time, the laws of society would enable anthropologists to adapt primitive cultures to civilisation. Social structure was an 'adaptive mechanism' that fitted a people to its environment; if colonialism changed the environment, social structure, once its various functioning elements were properly understood, could be adjusted to its new situation, Radcliffe-Brown proposed.¹²

Elkin had long accepted Durkheim's account of religion as providing valuable insight. He participated in Radcliffe-Brown's empirical development of Durkheim's idea, such that religion, as the fundamental element by which kinship extended into society, and related society to nature, was a key to a new anthropology (or sociology) of precise practical power. In 1929, Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin met regularly to discuss (amongst other technical

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹¹ EE Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 40–46. Stocking, *After Tylor*, 426.

¹² AR Radcliffe-Brown, 'Editorial', *Oceania* I (1), April 1930, 1–4, at 2–3.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

questions) the ways in which Elkin's data exposed Durkheim's errors of fact and emphasis, but ultimately strengthened the Frenchman's hypothesis.¹³

A participant observer of the function of religion

As a clergyman, Elkin had the opportunity to be a participant observer of this sociology of religion. Before he published articles about the function of religion, he used the key insights from structural functionalism to explain his role as Rector to the Anglican congregation at Morpeth. On 11 July 1929, after working closely with Radcliffe-Brown in the first six months of the year, he was inducted as priest. His sermon notes for his introductory address record the thoughts he planned to share with his new audience: '*The function of religion* = (1) to bind society together; (2) to give courage, faith, purpose.'¹⁴ These clauses neatly encapsulate, firstly, religion's extension of kin ties to social identity; secondly, religion's provision of a congruent relation between the individual and the world beyond society. Elkin's first sermon to his new congregation at Morpeth reflected central aspects of Durkheim's theory of religion.

Elkin took seriously the means by which the church impressed a corporate identity upon its members. Like Radcliffe-Brown, he emphasized that religion was a matter of social inclusion through forms that transcended individual performance. In his first address to the parishioners of Morpeth, he paid his respects to his predecessors, and then he downplayed the personal aspect of ministry, and emphasized instead the priest's social function:

I don't suppose I shall manifest their good qualities—single or combined—Please do not look for such. But see if there be any ways in which I can keep you in your religious, moral and social life and thus keep you [in the] wider life and community.¹⁵

One way he would try so to keep them, he said, was to 'use ritual that is most helpful and most worthy' as 'acts of self-dedication, the means by which we realise the Divine and through which we receive the Spirit.'¹⁶

¹³ Radcliffe-Brown, 'Religion and Society', 167–168.

¹⁴ First address to Morpeth congregation: July 1929 paginated manuscript, EP, 5/3/3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

7. Reverence and religious continuity

Elkin's first year at Morpeth has been remembered for the steps he took to make ritual more varied and compelling. He introduced 'high Church' symbols, such as genuflection before the cross, and gold crosses on the altar. The Bishop dusted off his Cope for Sunday mass at Morpeth. Elkin arranged that the colours of robes and altar cloths should reflect the Church season: purple for Lent, red for Christmas. On Palm Sunday, he encouraged volunteers to fill the church with greenery. He reinstated the choral procession.¹⁷ His co-editor of the *Review* and vice-warden of St. John's, R. S. Lee, found the services 'very beautiful'.¹⁸

The influence of Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim complicated Elkin's predisposition towards ritual. Lee, Burgmann, and Elkin all identified as Anglo-Catholics. They shared a belief in ritual as a way to unify the whole man's religious experience (will, intellect, emotion, and aesthetic sense), and to dramatise the Anglican Church's continuous apostolic succession since Christ commissioned Peter to lead his disciples after his death (Ch. 2). But Elkin's up-scaling of ritual after working closely with Radcliffe-Brown for six months – and after having spent a year studying Aboriginal religion in the field – was surely no coincidence. Elkin's writing on the function of religion provided more evidence that he regarded his priestly ministrations in the light of academic sociology of religion.

In two articles he published on the 'function of religion', Elkin developed the themes with which he introduced his ministry to his Morpeth congregation.¹⁹ In the first article, he applied the structural-functional idea of social cohesion to a stadial theory of social and religious development. He argued that the essentials religion furnished – a binding relation between individual, society, and the unknown, producing both courage, and social cohesion – were evident throughout.²⁰ Primitive peoples needed faith in the hunt, and used rituals to create a self-fulfilling confidence of success. Agrarian peoples sought to imitate natural processes, and so used sacrifice to extend their sense of control over seasonal and life-cycle processes of death and rebirth. The theocratic societies of the middle ages used religion to sanction the will of the ruler, internalise obedience, and so reconcile the earthly and the

¹⁷ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 90.

¹⁸ Lee to Kate Lee, 17.11.1929; cited in Hempenstall, *Meddlesome Priest*, 127.

¹⁹ 'The Function of Religion in Society', *Morpeth Review* II (16), June 1931, 8–17; 'The Present Social Function of Religion', *Morpeth Review* II (16), December 1931, 23–33.

²⁰ Elkin, 'Function of Religion', 15.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

heavenly realms. The pastoral societies that first developed strong property regimes practised a religion of righteousness, which supported confidence in their right to raid the settlements of lesser people. He concluded:

[R]eligion selects certain possibilities, generally the most hopeful and desirable, and provided they are not anti-social, makes dogmas of them and relates the fundamental social and moral laws to them, thus providing these with an ultimate and supernatural sanction. And in doing this, religion performs the essential function of ensuring the solidarity of society. ... [if the individual, at whatever stage of cultural development, observe his religious obligation]: Then all will be well both with himself and with the society to which he belongs.²¹

In presenting this wholly instrumental and relativist view of religion, Elkin offered no compromise with the view that religion corresponded with a truth that spanned different societies, or connected the individual with anything other than his own society. In other words, it lacked an ontology, except to the extent that the operation ‘religion *selects*’ implied that evolution was the fundamental principle – a point to which we will return. Elkin’s schematic history of religion – up to the medieval era – was a series of necessary, amoral adaptations to social, economic, and political changes. The article marked a high point of impersonality in his ideas about religion, and will serve to indicate the end of his realist phase. Yet, he wrote it as a prequel to a sermon.

In the originating sermon, we see Elkin’s attempt to bridge his religious role and his sociological insight. He probably delivered it soon after taking on his Ministry at Morpeth and the co-editorship of the *Review*; but also amidst the intellectual stimulus of the new dimension to his understanding of religion’s function that he explored with Radcliffe-Brown.²² In 1931, he published a revised version as ‘The Present Social Function of Religion’.²³ He retained the argument and the exhortatory conclusion of the sermon form, but as published it was written in the voice of ‘the sociologist’.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’, undated, paginated manuscript of sermon, filed with 1929 sermon notebook, EP 5/3/3. The themes follow directly from his dated inaugural sermon at Morpeth.

²³ ‘The Present Social Function of Religion’, 23–33. These two articles were published after Elkin returned from his second year in the field. But they clearly belong to the line of thinking he was pursuing in 1929. The sermon notes that became ‘The Present Social Function of Religion’ appear in his 1929 sermon notebook (see note above).

²⁴ Elkin, ‘Present Social Function of Religion’, 23.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

In 'The Present Social Function of Religion', Elkin extended his functional account of religion into his own time. Pre-modern religious forms had been variations upon the theme of adaptation. Social ideals before the modern era were of interest insofar as they made a particular polity and economy function. Religion (and Elkin) called the modern citizen to exemplify and project an ideal of personal freedom, achieved through overcoming narrow group loyalties, or sectional interest. This social project was the necessary corollary of individuation and the division of labour, but also the corrective for those trends. In this way, a society could be democratic and industrial, and yet cohere; and the individual could himself achieve a faithful, sanctioned, spiritually secure life.

In analysing modernity, Elkin conceived religion in a new way. In fulfilling the *function* most needed in the latest phase of civilization, religion became the *culture* that redeemed the plural interests competing within the modern polity and economy.²⁵ In 'The Present Social Function of Religion' (and not in its prequel), Elkin presented teleological norms – ideals – to do with the approach to an ultimate human goodness.²⁶ Religion became an apprehension of a quality of will that existed in contradistinction to 'mere time-standards' or to social and political trends.²⁷

As such, religion was now oppositional, even because it represented a greater unity than most individuals cared for. Industrial and political revolutions had liberated individual and groups alike to pursue particular interests,

but narrow, starved and stunted is that personality whose environment is limited to the immediate interests of the individual's particular political, cultural or economic group. Man's great need then is to have the confines of his environment removed ever further ... away so that his soul will interact with the whole of society and not merely with a section of it.²⁸

Now, the goal of religion – cultural integration – ran counter to the lines along which society's individuals and sub-groups functioned in pursuit of material interests.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32: 'religion can preach the ideal of cultivating personality'.

²⁶ Religion provided 'captivating ideals of a great fellowship of groups', *ibid.*, 29; and 'the power to soar through all the heights of beauty, truth, goodness', *ibid.*, 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

But this shift in Elkin's thinking was not only a response to different historical eras; it also reflected his different intellectual roles. A scientific study of the past was one thing, a moral project for the present quite another. As an historical sociologist, Elkin followed Radcliffe-Brown in seeking laws that could objectively explain the way society worked. These laws were most easily observed in simpler, more primitive social structures. As a priest, Elkin followed Francis Anderson, and collaborated with Burgmann in the promotion of 'the ideal of cultivating personality'.²⁹ This ideal prompted scholarship, because personality came through the fulfilment of one's full heritage, but more important for the Idealists was the inspiration for devotion, commitment, and action. The Idealists were reformists, not mechanics. The historical sociologist could fruitfully see religion as an 'adaptive mechanism', the co-ordinating principle by which a society met its key challenges; but for purposes of active citizenship, that is, morally and religiously, such an instrumental account was insufficient. As his awkward segue from 'the sociologist' to preacher indicated, still in 1931 Elkin was caught between these two roles.

The dichotomy was clearest in Elkin's treatment of what he and Burgmann each abhorred as the increasingly 'mechanical' nature of modern society.³⁰ 'Society is becoming a vast machine, running to a timetable, rather than an organism or a brotherhood,' Elkin warned.³¹ But exactly this kind of systematic functionality was what he had identified historically as the function of religion ('to standardise his views and actions in each particular type of society').³² Modern religion was to overturn the mechanical tendency by returning 'the personal element':

The mind has within it the power of freedom – the power to soar through all the heights of beauty, truth and goodness, and to do so unhindered by mechanical laws. ... And that man may realise these powers, industry, commerce, unions, government and so on must be made to conform to the needs of human character; that is,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰ Burgmann wrote to his Bishop of his plans that St John's should replace the existing degree in Theology with: 'a live religious education': 'any leader today must know the forces that are moving in and making the modern world. He must know something of the effect of the mechanisation of industry on social life and morality, something of the complexity of our civilisation and the nature and power of a growing secularism.' Burgmann to Long 29/7/28, cited in Hempenstall, *Meddlesome Priest*, 116–17. For Burgmann's ongoing argument that Christianity could build an organic culture that would overcome industrial social mechanism, see also Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism*, 142–148, especially 144.

³¹ Elkin, 'Present Social Function of Religion', 25.

³² Elkin, 'Function of Religion', 15.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

they must allow him to seek the unattainable, that which is above him, and not that which pays, or runs smoothly like a well-made machine.³³

Here, Elkin attempted the Platonic account of human freedom in which Burgmann specialised.³⁴ But he was unconvincing on two counts: the language was tired, and the ideas inconsistent – why did this feature of religion have no part in religion’s function in past phases of civilization (Plato’s city-state, or Jesus’ milieu in which tribalism persisted within a cosmopolitan empire, for instance)?

Developing a functionalist account of religion, Elkin encountered the problem of the individual’s sense of his free response to the divine order. Structural functionalism had little room for this response. As we have seen, Radcliffe-Brown defined his sociology specifically as a natural science, devoid of such inquiries into individual meaning. For Durkheim, the idea of freedom was modern; a product of the sophistication that accompanied the division of labour, and was a matter of manifold individual adjustments within socially pre-determined options.³⁵ This account was irreligious, in that the adjustments had no grounding outside a particular society’s frame of reference. Elkin’s solution in ‘The Present Social Function of Religion’ was to append, sermon-style, an Idealist exhortation: oppositional, prophetic, spiritual aspiration. In so doing, he ceded that he could not sustain the voice of the sociologist and still adequately account for religion’s mediation between individual freedom and ‘sanctions ... both super-individual and super-social’.³⁶

Durkheim’s sociology posed another, more essential problem for Elkin’s faith. As we have seen (Ch. 3), Durkheim developed his sociology with reference to Aboriginal religion, and the point of his argument was that in forming a social mind they unwittingly invented totems, the proto-types of God. Still in 1932, Elkin was haunted by this idea. In his account of his desert epiphany, he repeated his central affirmation many times: religion was not (as Durkheim claimed to show) a mere social effect. Aborigines displayed ‘Reverence; but not for the crowd, not for the assembled society, but for the spirit which is in and above all ... the

³³ Elkin, ‘Present Social Function of Religion’, 31–32.

³⁴ See, for example, EH Burgmann, ‘Review: The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought’, *Review of Life and Work* 1 (1), 1927; see also Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism*, 138–139.

³⁵ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 209–212; William Logue, *From Philosophy to Sociology: The Evolution of French Liberalism, 1870–1914* (Illinois: Northern University Press, 1983), 213–214.

³⁶ Elkin, ‘Present Social Function of Religion’, 29.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

spirit which is acknowledged, but not imaginatively created' by ritual and ceremony.³⁷ Again: white Australians 'must have sacred times, seasons, places, and rites, but these do not make God, though they do help us remember Him.' Once more: Social ritual is necessary 'in order that we may be sanctified for the sake of society. But we shall only be truly sanctified – not by losing ourselves in the crowd and being caught in its emotion – but by finding ourselves in God, and by being visited by Him.'

These were not bald claims. They followed from a new rationale for religion, which returned to the deeper, threefold Idealist structure, but substituted modern, realist premises for Idealism's metaphysical basis. A new interpretation of religious reverence enabled this development.

Problem-solving, eternal life, and glamour: Elkin adapts the diffusionist hypothesis

The central problem with structural functionalism for Elkin's purposes was that its practitioners deliberately omitted individual meanings. As we have just seen, reflecting Radcliffe-Brown's influence, Elkin's religious writing in 1929 and most of 1931 pursued structural functional lines, to an unsatisfying end-point. But Durkheim's sociology was not the only modern scholarly account of religion in which Elkin immersed himself. On either side of his purely structuralist period, Elkin wrote about religion from a diffusionist perspective. We saw in Chapter Four that Elkin read diffusionist histories and ethnologies intensively for at least four years from 1923. He studied with the diffusionists for two and a half years from mid-1925, and wrote a doctoral thesis in which he gathered evidence for Perry's hypothesis that Aboriginal religion derived from two waves of diffusion, each originating in ancient Egypt. The obvious reason for his diffusionist account of Aboriginal religion was that he maintained the line of analysis he had developed in his Doctorate, as he continued to work on the same subject matter.

Also, diffusionism gave Elkin exactly what structural functionalism lacked: a central role for the individual in religious processes. Gradually, from 1932, the diffusionist premises edged out the structural functionalist premises in Elkin's accounts of his own religion. Elkin did not dilute his concern for religion's cohesive effects, which had an important secondary

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

place in the diffusionist hypothesis, but he began to derive that aspect of religion from diffusionist premises, rather than treating it as a self-standing phenomenon.

For these reasons, in 1931, at the point when his exploration of religion's function petered out in a return to the clichéd Victorian gloss on Platonic idealism, Elkin returned to two basic premises of the diffusionist hypothesis. Firstly, history advanced because individuals found ways to solve their problems; secondly, the single most productive problem for the diffusion of culture had been mortality. Individuals had for millennia inherited and developed religious solutions to the problem of death.

Practical anthropological problems and personal religious questions merged in Elkin's transition from structural functionalist model to a diffusionist model of religion. Elkin's diffusionist thinking was not primarily concerned with religion. He studied with Perry and Elliot Smith in order to understand ethnology: processes of culture contact. We have observed results of his ethnological interest: in 1929, he hoped 'psychological factors' might guide culture contact, so that 'ethnic factors', and a racial view of colonialism, might recede in practical importance. He expected these cultural factors would yield such principles as gradual change, through the established Aboriginal cultural authorities.

His more distinctive adaptation of diffusionist ideas came when he sought more specific solutions to the Australian contact situation. What exactly in Aboriginal culture might settlers seek to change thus gradually, and what might constitute Aboriginal authority? In the early 1930s, in Elkin's first professional anthropological articles, Elkin perceived from a diffusionist perspective the vehicle for Aboriginal acculturation: he recast the diffusionist trope of secret societies as 'the secret life'.

The 'secret life' provided a link between settler and Indigenous Australian concerns that was conspicuously lacking in more obvious concerns. Elkin argued that there was no practicable socio-economic link between Aborigines' motives and meanings and those of white Australians. He believed that Aborigines had little interest in the material advances settlers valued, beyond some basics.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

The great difficulty is to give the aborigine a living interest in anything in our culture, apart from our food and tobacco. ... It almost seems impossible, for bank balances, nice houses and mechanical luxuries are so foreign to his way of life and thought; so too are agriculture and grazing and many of our occupations.³⁸

But when food and tobacco drew Aborigines in, they experienced

a dichotomy of authority. They respect the missionary or employer both for what he is, and for the material and other kindness shown by him. But their real interest is in that world of secret life and action which stretches far back in the days of the great heroes of old and forward beyond death itself. ... [T]he old men and the glamour of the secret life win.³⁹

Elkin decided that the only way by meeting Aborigines on this sacred ground could settlers find a 'psychological factor' that would make acculturative assimilation possible.

This prospect involved a strange alliance. Science, with its values of openness, reason, and clarity, must enable employers and missionaries to participate in a world of 'secrecy', 'mystery', and 'glamour'. The very secrecy in which Aborigines shrouded their religion 'adds to its importance, for it throws around it that glamour, sanctity, and mystery which is so valuable in the case of moral and social sanctions,' Elkin wrote.⁴⁰ Stranger still, the source from which Elkin derived these words, which he used often in 'The Secret Life', was Grafton Elliot Smith. Mystery and glamour were keywords in Elliot Smith's register, but always derogatory (Ch. 4). Elliot Smith associated these words with the deliberate deceit priests practised upon the ignorant, to preserve their authority after science had disproven their truth claims. Elkin neutralised Elliot Smith's critique to some extent by showing that Aborigines had no priestly caste; rather, all initiated men had responsibility for a portion of the religious heritage, organised by locality.⁴¹ Still, the fact that Elkin used the word 'glamour', an unusual choice in a religious context, indicates that he was invoking Elliot Smith's argument rather than distancing it. What had emboldened Elkin to publicise this inversion of Elliot Smith's evaluation of the priestly mysteries?

We will find an answer in the way Elkin began, after 1930, to accord fundamental importance in cultural matters to religious tradition. Elkin showed how 'mystery' and

³⁸ Elkin, 'Cultural and Racial Clash in Australia', *Morpeth Review*, 2 (21), 1932, 35–45, at 41.

³⁹ AP Elkin, 'The Secret Life of the Aborigines', *Oceania*, III, (2) Dec 1932, 119–138, at 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

'glamour' supported social solutions to the problem of mortality. Through the mortal individual's desire for religious support and inspiration, Elkin linked an evolutionary ontology with an Idealist teleology. The religious faith in continuity beyond individual mortality was how societies reconciled structure and agency, collective obligation and free will, Elkin taught. In this way, he performed a modern (post-Darwin and post-Durkheim) renovation of the deep structuralism his faith required.

Epiphany: cultural inheritance renovated

The temporary suspension of his various responsibilities, as he prepared for another year in the field, set the scene. On 27 February 1930, Elkin left his wife and sons with a housekeeper companion, his Parish in the care of two Curates. He had postponed his WEA tutorship, and handed over to Burgmann his teaching responsibilities at St John's College. He set off for the central Australian desert, millions of acres of the driest country in the southern hemisphere, aridity that had encroached into pastoral and wheat country during nine years of drought. Station managers had warned him that the few remaining Aborigines had scattered and were unreachable.

Yet, by camel train and sometimes car, eking out his allowance but still spending two years' worth in the first twelve months, he accumulated data on sacred ceremonies, social organization, totemism, and myth. He discovered the Aluridha kinship system. He compiled three books of genealogy, and filled nine notebooks with linguistic detail. He corrected errors in the internationally influential work of Spencer and Gillen. He took hundreds of photographs. The results of the fieldwork exceeded Radcliffe-Brown's expectations. But more fundamental than the data was Elkin's new sense of the divine.

Our key text for understanding this illumination is meditative, dramatic, and self-consciously literary – and as such, unique in Elkin's *oeuvre*. Published in the *Morpeth Review* in 1932, 'Religion and an Anthropologist' was a devotional exercise, in which Elkin dramatised an epiphany he experienced during his year of fieldwork in the central Australian desert.⁴² He intended the article – part philosophical essay, part sociological dialogue, part personal confession – to edify other Christians who questioned the viability of religion amidst the findings of modern science. The dialogic elements reveal the points of view against which

⁴² AP Elkin, 'Religion and an Anthropologist', *Morpeth Review* II (20), June 1932, 63–68.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

Elkin felt bound to defend his faith. These rivals were Darwin's materialist theory of evolution, and Durkheim's structuralist account of the function of religion. Interestingly, each of these points of view Elkin had already absorbed into his idea of religion, so his task was to find the right relation between his faith's disparate elements, as well as to fend off untenable associations. But mostly, he wanted to convey his sense of assurance that faith in a personal God, and the Christian traditions he valued, remained viable paths to an intellectually and morally vigorous life.

The solution at which Elkin arrived can be quickly summarised in abstract terms. After a schematic overview, we will return to the concrete history to see how Elkin worked out his ideas in stages, in more personal, expressive form. The following scheme corresponds to the outline of the Idealist structure, near the beginning of this chapter, of which it was a renovation.

1. He found security for the individual will by positing its origin and purpose in a transcendent unity, which was glimpsed by the scientist as evolution, and glimpsed by the disciple as God. That is, he began from an individualist ontology.
2. From that basis, the self found reconciliation with society on a religious plane by joining in the ritual forms by which union with the divine was codified, celebrated, enjoined, taught, and experienced. In 1933, writing on 'Christian Ritual' he strengthened this plane by explicating the way religion solved basic problems such as the meaning of death.⁴³
3. The self found reconciliation with society on the political plane – that is, as an historical, purposeful, changing entity – with reference to both the ontological and the social-religious planes of integration just mentioned. Ontologically, the ground of being was evolution, and evolution demanded adaptation to new environments, which in modern times required the Idealist project. Socio-religiously, societies possessed 'culture-heroes', whose presence and example, ritually evoked, provided 'heavenly sanction' for individual and group purposes.

⁴³ AP Elkin, *Christian Ritual* (Morpeth: Morpeth Booklet 8, 1933). Exposition below.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

The whole movement referred back at each point to the individual's sense that his true nature consisted in a dual relation – passive (through grace) and active (sanctioned striving) – with the Absolute.

The article began with an imagined doubter's challenge. 'How can you who think in terms of evolution and environment and millions of years, find a place for religion in life?'⁴⁴ Elkin answered that

Life, ever striving and purposeful, is always ready and able to meet every outward change, and in the innate necessity for doing this, to manifest itself in ever more complete and wonderful forms, culminating in man with his aspirations for social harmony, for 'truth, beauty, and goodness.' [Evolution is] just a term for this marvellous fact of the inter-relation of all living forms.⁴⁵

The unity of which man formed part was 'Life' itself: 'Thus, we find our place in the great "scheme of things"; we do belong to it, and without it, we should not be.'⁴⁶ This starting point was familiar.⁴⁷ The logic of structuralism, and the habits of faith, required that Elkin articulate how this ontological grounding was at the same time an integration of religious and political being. His attempt to do this comprised the new development.

The religious development from the evolutionary ontology occurred through a combination of consciousness with purpose, Elkin suggested. '[K]nowing his place in life's story, [man] can consciously strive ... to catch something of the purpose of it all. He feels that he can at least cry out, not merely "What is man?" but "Lord, what is man!"'⁴⁸ The first question was the perplexed cry of consciousness – seeing, and lost in, the immensity around. In the religious alternative, the speaker saw his own capacity for wonder as a personal partnership with that which he beheld. By a simple act of direct speech, Elkin implied a good deal about a mode of consciousness: the religious attitude was purposeful but also submissive, making sense of its situation by invoking and personifying a guiding (or at least interested) authority: 'Lord'. This conceptual move recalls Marett's speculation about early religious consciousness (Ch. 3), which we have called 'religious vitalism'. In his Masters

⁴⁴ Elkin, 'Religion and an Anthropologist', 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁷ AP Elkin, 'War and the Future', *The Church Standard*, 4 July 1924, Papers of Elkin, NLA, MS9834/2/1.

⁴⁸ Elkin, 'Religion and an Anthropologist', 64. Emphasis in the original.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

thesis, Elkin had followed Marett in seeking a realist basis for religious experience in the new 'psycho-biology'. Now, the socio-religious practices of submissive or chastened striving referred to modern man's consciousness of being the leading edge of evolution.

The political development from the evolutionary ontology drew upon a simpler realist trope: the extinction of unfit life forms. He stated outright that humans must strive morally, or else be passed by in the course of evolution: 'the higher social and spiritual realms which are opening out before him ... constitute for [man] the environmental change. The alternatives are death, or advance, victory and life.'⁴⁹ Given that this conclusion came within a meditation most of which was set in the company of Aborigines, whose social realm Elkin believed to be amongst the lowest on earth, this was a moment of extreme evolutionary fatalism. But it did provide a realist ground for Idealism.

His next section began a new spiral of integration, from mystical experience. He set evolution aside, and moved from the individual's grounding in a meta-narrative (his first sub-head was 'The Story of Evolution') to a dramatic evocation of immanence ('The Universe Around').⁵⁰ Man's 'environment still includes the universe', he wrote. 'Have you felt it? If not, go out into the very heart of Australia ... you almost hear again the music of the "crystal spheres".' A few hundred yards away, clapping sticks punctuated a corroboree-song. 'This only adds to the impression, for ... those dark-skinned men have felt as you feel.' The stars were the heroes of old, a soul road, and a river for the thirsty, Elkin wrote. 'It is all so friendly and natural; a source of inspiration and hope.' The Aborigines *are* religious, he insisted against an imagined doubter, 'because they can sit: quiet, meditating in receptive mood.'

Elkin associated the biblical injunction to 'Be still and know that I am God' with Aborigines' meditative receptivity. His imagined interlocutor may have been himself in 1929: the scholar who for a general public discussed Aboriginal belief as 'Primitive "Literature"'.⁵¹ Now, the distancing quotation marks, and the reduction of spirituality to mere genre had gone. Aborigines knew how to ' "Be still and know." ' The desert almost compelled it, Elkin wrote:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 63, 65.

⁵¹ Elkin, 'Primitive "Literature"', *Morpeth Review* II (14), December 1930; 'Primitive "Literature" – Continued', *Morpeth Review* II (15), March 1931, 38–47.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

How often have I noticed a black-fellow sitting still, oblivious to all around him, and knowing! And could one help doing that out there in those vast and wonderful stillnesses and silences of the heart of the continent.⁵²

The Aboriginal initiate knew that the basis of his being was a spiritual unity with ‘the universe around’, Elkin told.

From this second model of the individual’s ontological integration, Elkin again developed social-religious and political corollaries. ‘Be still and know’ was one of two recurring motifs Elkin used in the essay; the other, also from the Bible, he associated with his own epiphany. The passage just quoted continued:

There is something which speaks, which grips – and you want to put out your hand, your very self and be one with this something, this eternal majesty which is so vast and great, and yet so near. Advent and *Parousia!* ‘Lord, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the Son of Man that Thou visitest him?’

Out there, you solve in experience, if not in philosophical argument, the problem of the immanent and transcendent, the temporal and the eternal, the subjective and the objective. Both are real to you. That which comes to you immanent in the temporal and subjective, is God, the transcendent, the eternal, ‘the without that is within’.⁵³

‘Advent’ and ‘*Parousia*’ are the English and the Greek for the coming to Christ’s disciples of the Holy Spirit. The Aborigines had their spiritual practice of meditation, instituted as part of their rites of passage⁵⁴; Elkin had the conception of a divine irruption into the lives of disciples. But after this one reference to the New Testament symbolism of the ‘Holy Spirit’, Elkin reiterated the natural, personal tenor of the Psalmist’s wonder: ‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers ... what is man that you are mindful of him?’⁵⁵ The psalmist began from a sense of the sublime, and expressed it traditionally as the work of a personal god. For Elkin, religion was a discipline and a tradition that supported and advanced through the individual’s mystical apprehension of the real unity of life.

He dramatised religious integration with reference to the experience of two individual types: in the first person, and through the lone Aboriginal, meditating. Within the

⁵² Elkin, ‘Religion and an Anthropologist’, 66.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Elkin, ‘Secret Life’; *idem*, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1978 (1945)), 7, 14, 42.

⁵⁵ Psalm 8, 3–4; see also Hebrews 2: 6–8, 1 Corinthians 15:26, Ephesians, 1:22.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

deterministic, inhuman evolutionary scheme, man was wondrous, but Aborigines were doomed; in the spiritual domain, Aborigines were Elkin's equals. Elkin indicated that experiential truth by dramatising a meeting between 'the anthropologist', transposed into the second person, and 'those two or three men coming towards you quietly. Meet them. They only carry a piece of board with perhaps a few marks incised on it. But notice their reverence as they uncover it and show it to you.'⁵⁶ He again attributed the impressive quality of their religious experience to their capacity to 'Be still and know ... the spirit which is in and above all, working through the culture-heroes of old, and symbolized in and working through, the simple but sacred signs and rites of today.'⁵⁷ This knowledge was unlike the explanatory scheme of evolution; it was knowledge of a relationship between dimensions of being, between the individual consciousness, social custom, and an experiential, mystical ontology.

In a juxtaposition that requires elucidation, Elkin linked these typical Aborigines' spiritual knowledge with the idea of freedom as an uncaused cause. The Aborigines became sacred, immersed in the presence of the spiritual reality, as they perceived it. Christians, too, could 'only be truly sanctified ... by finding ourselves in God, and by being visited by Him.' From this judgement, Elkin made a leap:

Thus, in the long story of life and of the universe, and of the interaction of the two, it is my religion, it is God, who saves me from being but a product, an effect, and who gives me my place in the great 'scheme of things'. He is in the world and in me, but He comes in it and in me, and is not just one or the other. And so, my real self is not only a manifestation of life in this universe, but also is transcendent. I too come into the world in some sense other than as one of its effects.

Here, Elkin equated sanctity and freedom. For modern man, the profane world was deterministic. Science had revealed a massive scheme of cause and effect in which moral advance was part of a bizarre series of physical adjustments (gills, for instance) and extinctions. Humanity's place at the forefront of this process was wondrous, but hardly spiritually satisfying, unless the biological law of survival of the fittest could somehow give way to or accommodate a human sense of purpose. The same reality that science knew as evolution had a different aspect when known by the spirit, and Elkin found, like Kant and

⁵⁶ Elkin, 'Religion and an Anthropologist', 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

7. Reverence and religious continuity

William James (and doubtless under their influence), that the defining feature of spiritual knowledge was freedom.

Elkin did not state the relation between Aboriginal sanctity and the idea of freedom. But in concluding he implied a connection. Shortly after his statement about religion as the antidote to determinism he concluded his essay. He ended by suggesting that if he doubted the spiritual nature of the universe,

Shall I not endeavour to share the experience of the saints, and see in the face of Jesus Christ both what man is and God too? For in Him I shall find the answer to that ever-recurring question: 'What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the Son of Man that Thou visitest him?'⁵⁸

Elkin had prepared his reader to look for a solution to doubt about the reality of spiritual freedom. Elkin located that answer in tradition: in Christianity's central 'culture-hero', and in the succession of disciples who passed on Christ's legacy. Thus, reinventing Durkheim, he located the uncaused cause in religious tradition. In Elkin's eyes, Aborigines' religion was a partnership with the natural world, in which sanctified purposes and relations had a meaning and value founded absolutely, in the unquestioned union of spirit and matter. The condition of freedom was a social faith that elaborated this basic unity, and produced sureness of belonging, value, and purpose. In European civilization, he urged, that assurance should be sought in the Christian religion.

This mystical and disinterested solution to the problem of mortality was an appropriate end-point for a recount of an epiphany. However, as we noticed earlier (Ch. 2), Elkin valued those concrete aspects of religion that embraced a broad cross-section of the community, and not merely philosophers or mystics. In a different context, and a less lofty vein, Elkin indicated the extent to which religious ritual had developed through an accretion over several millennia of people's attempts to prepare, out of a quite straightforward self-interest, for marriage, birth, coming of age, and fundamentally, for life after death.

We can understand his interest in a broad community of religious practitioners another way. The diffusionists taught that paradigm changes in spiritual vision drove history. For Elkin, the important paradigm was Idealist, disinterested, and universalist. But this

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

'higher social and spiritual realm' had been made possible by prior stages in the ascent of spiritual vision. Before humans tried to comprehend a general purpose or moral in life, they first imagined how life might continue beyond death. Still in Elkin's day, he believed, practical religion ought to offer solutions to the problem of mortality, and link the disciple's self-interest at critical points in life with the higher vision and deeper religious experience that the prophets and mystics revealed. In 1932, to assist priests in understanding this aspect of their role, Elkin delivered a series of lectures, in which he set out a diffusionist account of Christian ritual.⁵⁹

His theme was that rites were 're-enactments of a past event, pre-enactments of an event which is desired, and services of social and individual hope and courage.'⁶⁰ Thus, rites comprised a kind of historical narrative. The fundamental Christian rituals – baptism, confirmation, communion, and burial – each re-enacted Christ's sacrifice and victory over death; pre-enacted the disciple's own union with the victorious messiah; and 'enshrine[d] faith and hope for the future, for [the ritual was], indeed, a means of life here and hereafter'.⁶¹ In both narrative and purpose, these rituals replicated the fundamental elements of Egyptian mystery cults, Elkin wrote.⁶² At many points he elaborated the wide range of ancient Egyptian elements that survived in Catholic practice: pearls and shells as symbols of eternal life and water as a symbol of rebirth⁶³; and, the use of incense to evoke 'the life-giving presence of God', and standing stones to mark it⁶⁴; blood as the sustenance for life⁶⁵; and the importance of mystery and hierarchy – that is, 'cults' – in leading initiates into higher understandings of death.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ He gave the lectures in 1932 to the Goulburn Diocesan School of Sacred Study and the Maitland Clerical Society. AP Elkin, 'Christian Ritual I: Initiation', *Morpeth Review*, II (22), December 1932, 48–60; 'Christian Ritual II: Sacrifice', *Morpeth Review*, II (23), April 1933, 50–61; 'Christian Ritual II: Occasional Rites', *Morpeth Review*, II (24), July 1933, 59–66. Hereafter referred to as 'Initiation', 'Sacrifice', and 'Occasional Rites' respectively.

⁶⁰ Elkin, 'Initiation', 48.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 50–54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁴ Elkin, 'Sacrifice', 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁶ Elkin, 'Occasional Rites', 60: Elkin urged that the preparations for confirmation were not 'really adequate', and that Christian initiation should involve at least two more stages, 'in which moral, social and religious teaching should prepare the individual for his fuller social position and for an increasing understanding of religious truths – the 'secrets'. To the extent that these stages corresponded with Aboriginal initiation, we can infer that Elkin envisioned a decreasing reliance on literal truths, and an increasing basis of respect for the social role of religious mystery – just as in some tribes initiated Aborigines learned that the 'bullroarer' itself made a

7. Reverence and religious continuity

In the 'Christian Ritual' series, Elkin defended Catholicism. He argued against the Protestant tendency to prescribe minimalist ritual forms so as to achieve a more strictly spiritual focus. 'Specialized, narrowed, ... legalized' religious teachings were exactly what Jesus overthrew, Elkin wrote.⁶⁷ Jesus returned Jewish monotheism to 'the world conception' of religion, 'one of "life-giving", through union with the deity,' which first appeared in the Egyptian 'Mystery Religions'.⁶⁸ The Catholic faith gathered up all peoples 'as far as possible, through their own ritualistic attempts to get in touch with the infinite and to solve the problems of life.'⁶⁹ Whatever helped guide disciples towards higher solutions ought to be retained in ritual forms, Elkin urged. The mystic might or might not gain help from rites, 'but for most people such practices are the means of approach, the sole means, it may be, to the divine power whom they envisage in more or less anthropomorphic form,' Elkin believed.⁷⁰

The basis of his argument was personal experience. On his own authority, he rejected Elliot Smith's interpretation of priestly deceit, and valorised exactly what his one-time teacher disdained.

Of course, the objection might be made that such a view is giving the case to the so-called Rationalists, who would see nothing in Christianity but a watered down survival of a vegetation-cult or of ancestor worship. My own experience, however, says that this is not so, and that experience seems to me to be justified by the logic of reason. Further, the more we enter into the spirit and inner meaning of these ancient cults ... the more real does Christian experience become.⁷¹

That inner meaning was the central historical principle that the diffusionists elaborated from the survival instinct, and which bound together societies of death-conscious, life-willing individuals:

frightening noise, and not the ghosts whom elders invented to keep women and children away from sacred ceremonies. See AP Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 46.

⁶⁷ Elkin, 'Sacrifice', 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Elkin, 'Initiation', 59.

⁷⁰ Elkin, 'Religion of the Australian Aborigines', 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

It is the richness of the Catholic faith that grips us – scholar, priest, and member of the congregation alike – and that richness includes, and guides and satisfies that great urge of the human race for life which in its highest form, is a religious urge for life eternal.⁷²

With this summation, Elkin completed his revision of the religious function according to the diffusionists' realist premise.

Norms, Ideals, and enduring things

'Heavenly sanction' – the religious authority behind social norms and ideals – remained a constant emphasis in Elkin's writings during the seminal years in which he produced his 'positive policy' (Ch. 8) and his religious focus for social anthropology (Ch. 9). Elkin attributed importance to progressive and conservative sanctions; the 'moral prophet' sought to enforce both kinds. 'Society, especially in the persons of its moral prophets, ever endeavours to prevent such ritual from being mere magical form, and rightly makes moral and social demands of those desiring the benefits of the rites'.⁷³ This spirit had 'primitive and progressive aspects', as had been stressed a decade earlier in the Diocese of Newcastle summer school.⁷⁴ In the Jewish tradition, prophets were seen as calling the people back to the one true God; in the Christian faith, Isaiah and Christ were seen as looking forward to a more inclusive and morally superior dispensation – Elkin's 'higher social and spiritual realms'.

Over the next decade, Elkin developed his religious outlook by deepening his study of Aboriginal religion and by adapting his ideas to the secular priorities of his own society. His interest in ritual may have receded, at any rate it featured less (if at all) in his published writings. In place of ritual, he increasingly wrote of 'normality' as the milieu of practical, communal activity that expressed a collective attitude to that which endured.

Elkin gave the idea of normality a rich meaning in his treatment of the 'Aboriginal man of high degree' or medicine man. Countering prejudice, Elkin celebrated the sorcerer as a paragon of normality: he lived an ordinary life, and was typically 'jovial and pleasant in ...

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Elkin, 'Initiation', 49.

⁷⁴ Program of events for Summer school, 1922. Papers of Elkin, NLA, MS 9834/2/1.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

social relations'.⁷⁵ But, recalling Marett's rebuttal of Nietzsche (Ch. 3), the medicine man's very ordinariness was exceptional: 'he was a more complete exponent of normal life than those with less appreciation and understanding of the background of that life', Elkin wrote.⁷⁶

Men of high degree understood the relation between life and death better than other men. They endured and learnt from extra initiation rituals. At each stage, they were symbolically killed, and remade, perhaps with new intestines of quartz.⁷⁷ This 'making' of the medicine man gave him unique access to 'the power to which time, space, matter, and death are subject'. 'This world is believed to be the source of life in man and nature, and all fully initiated men are links with it.' But the man of high degree could access the spirit world freely, and 'understand in some real measure the workings of the human mind'.⁷⁸ The man of high degree put his special knowledge of the spiritual conditions of tribal life to practical use. He understood pride, guilt, and blame; deployed these relations in explanations of illness and sorcery; and found ways to restore social equilibrium.⁷⁹

Elkin accorded a central place in his sociology to those (civilised or primitive) who understood that material forms were evanescent and that spiritual things endured. He concluded that men of high degree were 'of immense social significance, the psychological health of the group largely depending on faith in their powers'.⁸⁰ Bearing in mind that their powers issued from their superior normality, we can see parallels between the sociology Elkin elaborated through the medicine man and that which he used to explain processes of change in his own society⁸¹:

The individual as such has no history; he becomes historical because in the course of his socialization or development he takes into his own life his society and its culture, which are not only the present stage in an historical process, but possess the depth of time and the breadth of community. As a result, the individual is caught up in a community of decision which transcends not only himself but also the present; his own decisions are for the most part moulded by the traditions of his community, and what modifications he makes are as though they had never been, unless sufficient members of his community decide to accept them and are so

⁷⁵ AP Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (1945), (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸¹ The parallels emerge clearly if we allow for a strong tendency towards equilibrium in Aboriginal society, and towards progress in Christendom.

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:
A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

affected by them that they pass into the heritage of the community. Put in another way, each individual becomes involved in a community of destiny – in the aims and attitudes expressed in his society's culture – a destiny which has been, and is being, worked out by the decisions and acceptances of many during the course of generations, and consequently holds out hope for the future.⁸²

The Aboriginal man of high degree gained access and understanding by a series of initiations into the Dreamtime; the Christian soul joined an enduring spiritual process by education that produced understanding of his 'community of destiny'.

We saw in Chapter Two that Elkin believed Aborigines and other Indigenous peoples handled spiritual education better than white Australians. This view becomes apparent again when we compare Elkin's account of the making of medicine men with the random and unsupported causes he saw behind the making of white Australian leaders. 'There is always a minority who for some cause or other – social, intellectual, psychopathological – endeavour to initiate changes, and often succeed directly or indirectly, sooner or later.' These comprise 'the intellectual, imaginative and courageous élite,' Elkin wrote.⁸³ A theme in both his account of the medicine man and the leader in his own society was 'psychopathology', or 'suffering of the mind': but whereas Aboriginal religion deployed that suffering deliberately, in white Australia it was exceptional, and had connotations of disease. This superiority of Aboriginal culture suggests that Elkin drew his understanding of normality from that source, and sought ways to apply it to his own society.⁸⁴

Conclusion and prospect

The ultimate, universal source of social sanctions and ideals, Elkin believed, stemmed from a socialised response to mortality. From this basis, Christendom and Aboriginal totemism alike had erected profound structures, integrating existential, religious, moral, and civic meanings and purposes. Elkin premised his account of each of these structures on individual experience

⁸² AP Elkin, *Society, the Individual and Change: with Special Reference to War and Other Present-Day Problems* (Sydney: Camden College, 1940), 65. For an interpretation of this passage as illustrating Elkin's conservatism, see Russell McGregor, 'Elkin on Christian Conversion', 49.

⁸³ AP Elkin, *Man, Society and Change* (Sydney: Christian Social Order Movement, 1943), 11.

⁸⁴ Elkin's argument in *Society, the Individual and Change* supports this interpretation. In that lecture series, Elkin spoke of the special insight he gained when he returned from the field. He saw that his society comprised incompatible groups, and that in such an environment, personal integration was impossible. The best that could be attempted was, through decision and purposefulness, to nudge society towards the integration of its groups. This Elkin attempted in his advocacy of 'inter-group ethics'; see 'Present Social Function of Religion', 28.

7. Reverence and religious continuity

of reverence and humility, issuing in obligation and aspiration. His personal, spiritual rationale became (to paraphrase) ‘advance to higher duties; do not stall, caught within old dogmas – or narrow ideals.’

Elkin’s religious experience affected his thinking about the application of science to problems of colonial administration. In Part Two, we saw that, after his first year in the field, Elkin wrote at length about the practical value of physical, that is, racial, anthropology for the determination of Australian policy. He portrayed social anthropology as a useful tool for administrators to use as they pursued whichever policy they assembled from amongst the options revealed by racial science. As Elkin then saw it, only for missionaries – whose work must begin from the moral imperative to understand, sustain, and then ‘fulfil’ Aboriginal religion – was social anthropology, and so matters of meaning and motive, of primary importance.

During and following his second year of fieldwork in 1930, we have seen, a thorough change occurred in the way Elkin related existential, communal, political, and scientific factors bearing upon Aboriginal affairs. A key feature of this change was his rejection of the positivism (in different versions, racialist and structuralist) that dominated Australian anthropology in the mid-1920s and early 1930s. Instead, from 1931 he favoured a bolder version of the voluntarism with which in the early 1920s he had attempted to refute Durkheim (Ch. 3), and a policy aspect of which in 1929 he had flagged as ‘the psychological factor’ (Ch. 6). To explain this change, in this chapter we have outlined a fundamental development in his religious thinking. In the next chapter, we will study a related development: Elkin’s rise to prominence as a public moralist.

We began with the internal religious process because it started first. Some time in the twelve months after January 1930, camped near Aborigines in the central Australian desert, Elkin experienced the epiphany, with reference to which eighteen months later he finally provided a satisfactory answer to Durkheim’s challenge to his faith. By then, he had already established himself as the leading thinker within the APNR, an ascent that began in April 1931. Thus, although the new phase in Elkin’s life was first evident in his publicity, the earlier cause seems to have been his religious experience in the desert.

Elkin’s re-foundation of the grounds of his faith proceeded over three years, in association with his increasing influence as a publicist; each process informed and promoted

Anchorage in Aboriginal affairs:

A. P. Elkin on religious continuity and civic obligation

the other. This interaction of faith and publicity caused Elkin to forge a new and seminal relation between publicity and science. In short, the fruits of faith replaced the ideal of detachment.

Elkin's new confidence in religious Idealism's real bases pertained to Aboriginal affairs in two ways. Firstly, through his public campaign to reveal white Australia's moral obligation (Ch. 8); and secondly, through his reconfiguration of Australian anthropology (Ch. 9).