

HISTORIES OF OLD AGES

Essays in honour of Rhys Jones



Edited by Atholl Anderson, Ian Lilley & Sue O'Connor

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Australian Aboriginal Art and Russian Icon Painting

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TWO ARTISTIC WORLDS: FEATURES IN COMMON

Medieval Russian icon painting and Australian Aboriginal art - what comparison could be more unexpected, more paradoxical? They belong to worlds very different in cultural history and in art. Yet comparison and apposition are feasible and acceptable, provided that one goes into the essence of both forms of art. Both Russian icon painting and traditional Aboriginal art — at least to a significant degree - belong to religious art, to religious creativity. They are both conceptual and the notion of the sacred is central to each of them. Their affinity, their common features are central for both — it is their place and function in social life, their content ('sacred history') and their language of symbol and metaphor. Their common themes indicate that they are based on universal archetypes of consciousness.

Traditional Aboriginal art, in its sources and fundamental forms, is religious and esoteric, although that does not imply that its content extends no further. It performs other functions: communicative, informational, educational and aesthetic, as well as philosophical and cognitive. However, they all are organically interwoven, and religion plays a dominant role in this complex. For the Aboriginal artist and the icon painter, abstract notions very often lie behind a material visual image, the world around is a great metaphor, full of symbols and concealed meanings. When it appears to us that the Aboriginal artist or icon painter seeks to depict the real world, actually they are drawing a world of meaning, a world of things, beings and happenings replete with meaning. For them the universe is an infinite system of signs. For both, their art, in the words of Saint Paul on faith, is 'the evidence of things not seen' (Hebrews XI, 1).

The philosophical, symbolic and metaphorical content of Aboriginal art, with its religious content, also give it an affinity with icon painting. One of the main topics of traditional Aboriginal art is the cycle of birth, life and death. An example of this is the theme of the morning star, a symbol of the transition of the soul from one state to another and in its final impetus towards the land of the dead. Widespread in the myths and art of the Aborigines is the theme of swallowing and subsequent ejection, for example of those undergoing initiation, as a metaphor for the transition from one metaphysical state to another and as a solution to the problem of transformation. An example is the myth of the Wagilag sisters, reproduced in the rites and in the art of Arnhem Land. The sisters and their children were swallowed and then vomited out by the Great Serpent. The myth is a metaphor for transition from one level of existence to another, for spiritual transformation. This is the inner meaning of the form of burial, widespread in the north of Australia, which consists of two stages separated in time. Burial is understood as the transfiguration of the body, as the liberation of the soul and its departure for the land of the dead (Hiatt 1975; Caruana 1993:48, 72–4, fig. 59). The same theme is developed on another plane and by other means as one of the main themes in icon painting.

The theme of the death and resurrection of a hero is significant in Aboriginal myths and art. An example is Laidjunga, a cultural hero of Arnhem Land, the originator of laws, customs and sacred rites. He was killed by envious men, but was resurrected in another form. We see him murdered, speared by enemies, in the lower

part of a bark painting. In the upper part he rises from a waterhole transfigured, with sacred emblems on his body (Allen 1975:64). The myth and the painting which illustrates it are remarkable in a number of ways. In the first place, we have a metaphysical transformation of the hero following his murder by treacherous enemies; sacred signs on his body are the visible expression of an inner, spiritual transformation. Do these signs not recall the stigma on the body of the resurrected Christ? It is also interesting that water appears as an element connected with resurrection to a new life in another, spiritually transformed shape. These themes reproduce the Christian paradigm and are evidence of the existence of a universal archetypal subject. Finally, attention must be drawn to the combination in one painting of two episodes occurring at different times — a device familiar in icon painting. Moreover, death and resurrection are in a metaphysical sense just two aspects of the one event.



Figure 1. Design for a wooden grave memorial to Thomas Bungeleen, Yarra tribe, ca. 1865. After R.B. Smyth *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1878, fig. 41.

Take the symbol of the labyrinth as an image of the world of the dead, as a reflection of ancient archetypal notions of death and resurrection to a new life. The Museum of Victoria has a wooden board made by an Aboriginal artist and placed on the grave of a member of his tribe who died in 1865 (Figure 1). Men with spears are carved in the upper part of the board. In the middle part there are emus, kangaroos and other animals. In the lower part there are three rows of anthropomorphic figures. The middle and lower parts of the board are totally covered with a design in the form of a labyrinth within which the animals and anthropomorphic figures are set. R. Brough Smyth offers the following interpretation, based on information from Aborigines, who, he says, no longer remembered the exact meaning of the images. The upper part of the board depicts friends of the dead man investigating his death; the animals in the middle part indicate that he did not die of hunger (?); below are the spirits who were the cause of his death (Smyth 1878:288, fig. 41). This interpretation is silent on the representation of the labyrinth, yet this latter is the key to decipher the meaning of the whole composition. The image of the labyrinth, since Palaeolithic times one of the most ancient and universal archetypes of human consciousness, is a symbol of the land of the dead, to which people and animals go, and from which they return, recalled by rites and invocations; I discuss this in more detail elsewhere (Kabo 1966, 1972). With this meaning, the visual image of the labyrinth is widely represented in Aboriginal art. It was in the south-east of the continent, where the board from the grave originated, that designs in the form of a labyrinth were carved on the trunks of trees surrounding graves, or sites where initiation ceremonies were performed (Figure 2); these images were also formed on the ground at initiation sites (McCarthy 1956:23-4, figs 10, 20). The labyrinth design was a sacred symbol connected with initiation ceremonies and funeral rites, both of which ritual systems are understood identically by traditional consciousness as transfiguration, as a metaphorical passage from one state to another. Hence I believe that the space on the board from the grave, filled with the design of the labyrinth, indicated the home of the dead, inhabited by the people and animals of the middle and lower parts of the board who have departed our world. The upper part depicts members of the dead man's tribe, witnesses to his last journey. Finally, it is significant that two rows of the anthropomorphic figures in the lower part are limbless: they are incomplete beings, the souls of people inhabiting the lower world, not yet born or not resurrected to a new life, an image known in Aboriginal mythology.

The labyrinth design is extremely rare in Russian icon painting. Hence *'The Path to Paradise'*, an icon dating from the seventeenth century in the Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg, is of particular interest (Figure 3). The path to paradise is depicted as a labyrinth. This subject is quite atypical for Orthodoxy, being evidently influenced by secular culture. However this may be, the ancient symbolism

of the labyrinth is transformed by the icon painter in the spirit of Christian philosophy. Each entrance to the labyrinth bears the name of one of the deadly sins: murder, slander, envy, fornication and so on. Beneath is Hell in the shape of a monster with gaping, all-consuming jaws, in wait for the straying human soul. Above is Christ radiant and enthroned, judging sinful mankind. On the right is a sinner on his deathbed, with the devil in the shape of a winged beast lurking to bear him off to the underworld. On the left is a righteous man, with an angel descending to bear him away to the land of the blessed. In the centre is a man in the Garden of Eden, where the tree of knowledge grows; this is possibly Adam, embodying sinful mankind (the legend above him is 'How I wish to go into the darkness'). The sense of this image and the notion of the path to paradise as a labyrinth in which the human soul is lost are quite clear. Nevertheless, here we have the ancient, universal image of the road to the home of the dead and the home itself as a labyrinth — an image connecting the picture on the Russian icon, permeated with the Christian conception of the world, with the mythical symbolism of traditional Aboriginal art.

Traditional Aboriginal art and icon painting are one in their aim to capture in their images, not the time in which the events of everyday life occur, but a transcendental, sacred time actuated in a ritual or mystery which reproduces events in sacred history, known by Aborigines as the Dreaming (Berndt and Berndt 1977:228–30; Elkin 1979:210; Stanner 1972). As Elkin has put it, the Dreaming is 'the ever-present, unseen, ground of being-of existence The concept is not of a "horizontal" line extending back chronologically through a series of pasts, but rather of a "vertical" line in which the past underlies and is within the present' (Elkin 1969:88, 93). The same concept of time is found in icon painting. The notion of space in the two artistic traditions is also a dual one. Icon painting and Aboriginal art recognise two categories of space: the space of tangible, material reality and that of a reality spiritually visualised. The latter category includes mythological geography, an image of the earth in its sacred dimension, sacred history imprinted on a locality.

Sacred time and sacred space obey their own laws, their visual embodiment requiring specific devices. Icon painting and Aboriginal art use similar devices to convey the development of action and the movement of time. Such devices include repeating the figure being depicted, such as representing several images of the Virgin on one icon; or placing in one and the same space events which take place at different times. An example in Aboriginal art is the depiction twice on one painting of the great mythical hero Lumaluma, as a living being and as a spirit in the form of a skeleton, both being in sacred space and emitting radiance. The hero's wanderings, his



Figure 2. The design on the carved tree from the Dubbo district, New South Wales. F.D. McCarthy, *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, Sydney, 1956, fig. 10.

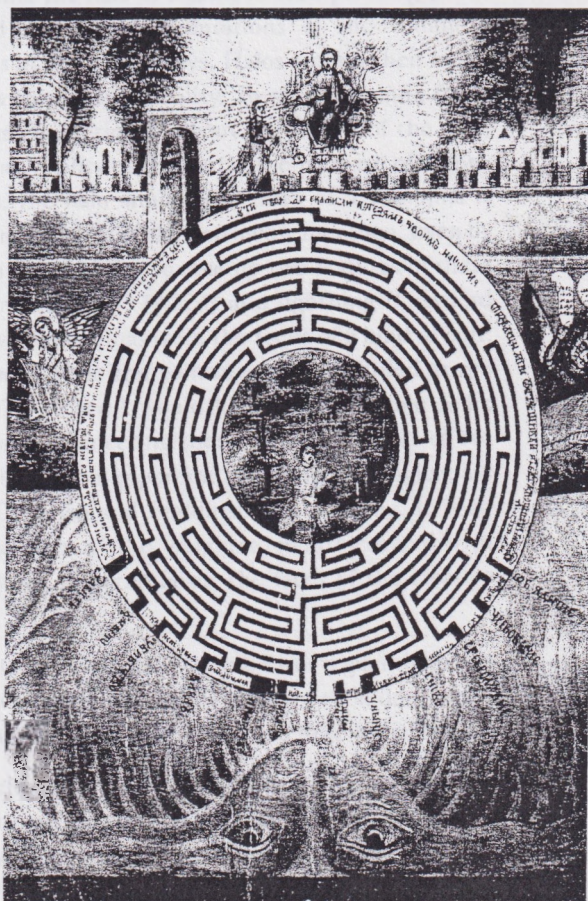


Figure 3. 'The Path to Paradise', 17th century icon in the Museum of History of Religion, St Petersburg, Russia.

persecution and death, and the sacred objects given by him to his descendants are all represented in the one painting (Ryan 1990:76, 95, 114, plate 55). The device is widespread in medieval Russian icon painting, for example in the cycle *'The Assumption of the Virgin'*. We see the body of the Virgin laid out, her soul in the hands of the Archangel Michael standing beside her, and then her soul born off to Heaven by angels, all in the one icon. In an icon on the same topic, the twelve Apostles are also seen both descending on clouds and surrounding the body of the Virgin. The fifteenth century icon *'The Conception of John the Baptist'* juxtaposes two periods of time, separated not only by an interval of several decades, but also by a miraculous event, the birth of the prophet. It shows the parents of Saint John meeting, rejoicing at the news of the miracle of the advent of the prophet to be, and, beside them, the already adult John the Baptist. The fifteenth century icon *'The Beheading of John the Baptist'* shows John, as yet unharmed, with head bowed under the executioner's blade, and with his head, cut off, at his feet. This is one of the most striking examples of the juxtaposition of non-contemporaneous events in Russian icon painting. A plurality of non-contemporaneous events and happenings filling the field of the icon is one of the most typical devices of Russian icon painting. The icon painter, naturally, knows that the head of a victim of execution cannot lie at his feet until the fatal blow is delivered, or that a grown man cannot stand beside his parents as they await his birth. Yet he knows equally that earthly laws do not apply in the world of sacred entities.

A bright light, an aura, is associated by the Aborigines with the power of their mythical ancestors (Morphy 1991:194). The great Rainbow Serpent, regarded in northern Australia as the most powerful of mythical beings, is sometimes depicted in the radiance of a rainbow like the halo of a saint in icon painting (Allen 1975:71). The most remarkable phenomena of this kind are the representations of the Wandjina, anthropomorphic mythical beings, on the cliffs and cave walls of the Kimberleys. Halos around their heads are typical features. The Aborigines associate the Wandjina with rain and fertility. To renew them in fresh, bright colours is magic contributing to restoring their strength and bringing about the return of the rainy season. To control the rain is to control the elements; it is the fertility of the earth, the increase of plants, animals and humankind itself. According to the Aborigines, the halo around the head of a Wandjina is normally taken to be a rainbow accompanying the rain or a thunderclouds of the northwest monsoon, riven by lightning. All who have written about Wandjinas agree on this. I would like to take up two features of these reports. The first is the association of halos with the rainbow (Elkin 1979:224) and lightning (Crawford 1968) - phenomena which impress by their brilliance. Moreover, Wandjinas were the focus of a kind of cult: some rituals were performed in conjunction with the paintings, while the paintings were regarded as the creation of the Wandjinas themselves (Crawford 1968:31, 37). Hence I would like to suggest that some ancient archetype underlies the paintings of halos of Wandjinas, connecting them with the images of the saints in icon painting. The halos around the heads of these beings, so important in Aboriginal religion, are the same aura which surrounds the heads of the saints in Christian and Buddhist icon painting. It is an emanation characteristic of something numinous. The white faces of the Wandjina, mouthless and with huge, black, hollow eyes, bring to mind human skulls. They are ancestral faces, the faces of the creators of the world, who have left their images on the rock faces.

Rock paintings of this kind are found beyond the Kimberleys. On a cliff in the Victoria River region there was discovered a full length drawing of an anthropomorphic being with arms raised as in a pose of adoration, with a white, mouthless face, large, black eye sockets, and a head surrounded by an aura (Lewis and Rose 1988:plate 4).

In the rock paintings the dead eyes of the Wandjina are circled by red rays; these radiate the magic, life-giving power latent within. At the opposite end of the continent, in New South Wales, a cliff face bears a picture of the mythical being Baiame. Like the Wandjina, he is mouthless, but with huge, brilliant eyes in a dark face; light emanates from his sacred inner being (Godden and Malnic 1982:plate 28).

In icon painting, halos encircling the heads of saints, apostles and prophets are so much a tradition that more need not be said. Christ and the Madonna appear with an aura in icons and church frescoes. Icons of

the Transfiguration show a brilliant radiance emanating from Christ, his figure painted on the background of a circle of light. The analogy is clear; it derives, probably, from the mysterious depths of religious consciousness, from a perception of figures from the sacred world exuding an aura.

SYMBOLS: THEIR ORIGIN AND ESSENCE

Amongst the abstract symbols most frequently encountered in Aboriginal art are the circle, the concentric circle and the spiral, and, derived therefrom, the concentric arc, together with the zigzag and the wavy line. The cross is less common. All these symbols are significant and are polysemic; each carries multiple meanings. The most productive are, however, the circle, the concentric circle and the spiral. The genesis of these symbols can be traced from the Palaeolithic age: the earliest images relate to the Middle and even Early Palaeolithic. Alexander Marshack describes a concentric arc carved on a stone plate; the tablet is ca. 54,000 BP and originated in Quneitra in the Near East. Marshack supposes that the Quneitra design is prompted by the rainbow and indicates its probable connection with seasonal rites. Another set of symbolic designs from the Middle Paleolithic are the zigzags carved on a bone fragment from Bacho Kiro (Bulgaria) and dated to ca. 44,000 BP (Marshack 1996). The zigzag motif, however, appeared much earlier - ca. 300,000 BP: a bone fragment from that time from Pech de l'Azé (France) shows perhaps the earliest carving in the form of a zigzag or meander (Marshack 1977). Objects analogous to the *tjuringa* are known in the Palaeolithic: one of such Palaeolithic *tjuringa* from Predmosti (Czech Republic), made of mammoth bone, is covered with a pattern of concentric arcs. The mysterious bone batons from the Late Palaeolithic cave at Isturitz (France) bear a relief forming a complex system of concentric arcs and spirals. There is a very interesting bone plate from Malta (Siberia), one side of which is decorated with a spiral design and the other with zigzags, possibly representing snakes (Jelinek 1976:429, fig. 683, 449, fig. 722, 451, fig. 729, 452, figs 732, 733).

A stone disc with a carved cross was found in the Middle Palaeolithic complex of the Tata Cave (Hungary). This is not the only representation of a cross found in the Palaeolithic. A limestone plate with a clearly cut four-pointed cross was found in the Middle Palaeolithic layer of the Tsona Cave (Georgia). There are crosses carved on a bone fragment from Vilen and on a statuette of a mammoth from Vogelherd (Germany) (Stolyar 1985:125, 127, figs 71, 91, 92, 93). Nevertheless the cross is rare in the Palaeolithic, while concentric arcs, spirals, zigzags and similar designs are frequent; only a few examples are given here.

Orientation in space, the ability of the mind to conceptualise space as a whole, the notion of the centre of a space and its vectors, were all achieved by mankind in the Palaeolithic, as primitive communities occupied territory, constructed dwellings and settlements, went on hunting expeditions and migrations, with the community and the individual coming more and more to feel themselves the centre of the cosmos. The spatial organisation of social life, from as far back as the stone age, can be expressed geometrically: basically it is circular in form (a constructed dwelling, often on a circular plan, and the territory occupied by the people around it) and radial (the community's movement from its home base and back). This found graphic expression in the symbol of the circle and concentric circle embodying the notion of the social group and the universe around it. It was expressed also in the symbols of the wavy line, the zigzag and the labyrinth as ideograms of movement and the occupation of space and of wanderings in this and in another world. Finally, it was expressed in the symbol of the cross as the centre of the universe and the four basic vectors which made it up. All these symbols are rooted in human consciousness as its most ancient archetypes.

Such is the age of some basic archetypal symbols which have then passed through many millennia of the history of visual symbols and absorbed a number of images created by mythological consciousness. These ancient archetypes and the notions connected with them are unbelievably stable, capable of being reproduced during the lives of many generations, in the Palaeolithic, in Aboriginal art and even in icon painting.

Tindale (1974:38, 1978:157) states that the circle and the spiral express in graphic form the idea of home or dwelling place. In the Western Desert, concentric circles usually represented camping places or sanctuaries and the lines between them the paths and tracks of Aborigines or mythological beings. Among the Warlpiri, the circle, one of the basic symbols, most often conveys the idea of a camp site or a waterhole in the centre of a camp. It also has the meaning of a maternal bosom, which is one of the universal archetypes of human culture (Munn 1973a:68, 117, 138, 1973b:197, 213, fig. 8). In both meanings, the circle symbolises the place where the life force is to be found.

The ancient sacred symbols of the circle and the concentric circle had their place in the culture of the Slavs. One of the most stable forms of Slavonic pagan sacred places were circular structures with two concentric earth walls, in the centre of which an idol was placed (Rybakov 1987:223–5, fig. 44).

Taking their place in medieval icon painting, the circle and concentric circle brought a rich legacy of pre-Christian notions. In icon painting, these ancient archetypes acquired new meaning, while retaining something deep and fundamental. In icons on *'The Assumption of the Virgin'*, the Madonna risen to Heaven is frequently painted in a concentric circle. The circle here is a symbol of Heaven as of home, a metaphor of the soul's return to its eternal abode. In this connection, we recall the symbol of the circle as home in Aboriginal traditional art, the symbol of the circle as a place from whence come and whither go the heroes of the Dreaming.

The concentric circle of the icon is a symbol of sacred space, frequently observed also in Aboriginal art. Christ as king of the world is represented in a concentric circle as the sacred centre of the cosmos. In the sixteenth century icon *'The Fiery Ascension of Elias the Prophet'*, a concentric circle symbolises Heaven as a sacred space filled with fire (Alpatov 1984:plates 7, 25, 64, 79).

The cross symbol can be traced through the whole history of humankind, acquiring in Christianity a deep sacred meaning. It is possible that Palaeolithic carvings in the form of a cross were connected with spatial or cosmic symbolism. The symbolism of the cross is also developed in Aboriginal art. The *waninja*, or thread crosses, ritual objects, took the form of a cross in central Australia. The cross controls the composition of many sacred works of Aboriginal art (e.g. Elkin et al. 1950:66–67, plate 11a; Sutton 1988:figs 36, 39, 40, 44; Ryan 1990:viii, 105, 111, plates 2, 31). The cross may be an abstract representation of sacred ceremonial ground (Ryan 1990:25, fig. 11). One painting in traditional style shows a composition, typical of certain icons, in the form of a cross, with a human figure placed at each side, though in the centre, in place of the crucifixion, is a large circle resembling the sun (Sutton 1988:fig. 43).

The Aborigines themselves may understand the cross motif differently; their interpretation is most frequently taken from material objects around them. This is just one of many instances when ancient archetypes and the corresponding ideograms, through successive millennia and cultures, acquire a new meaning, when a new, rational explanation replaces one forgotten. In some instances, however, a composition with a cross dominant has, in addition to the overt version, a covert one known only to the initiated (Sutton 1988:104, 118–19, fig. 144). This confirms our supposition that the cross symbol rests on a system of notions and associations with sacred meaning accessible only to those initiated into the secret versions of the myth.

The female figure with upraised arms, in a pose of adoration, is another link between Aboriginal painting and icon painting. In this way, Aboriginal art presents a woman as mythical ancestor of a clan and cultural hero — for example in Narritjin Maymuru's painting (Ryan 1990:27, 107, plate 8).

The image of the Madonna has its source in the ancient cults of the Great Mother, traces of which have been retained by the Slavs and date back to the primitive farmers of Tripolye, to Neolithic Greece and Near Asia, and perhaps even further, to the most ancient layers of human culture. There are archaic traces of the image of the Great Mother in Aboriginal culture, not only in cults and myths, but also in art.

POPULAR CHRISTIANITY AND ANCIENT ETHNIC RELIGIONS

The current religious situation in Aboriginal society in Australia has something in common with what happened in Kievan Russia at the time of the adoption and spread of Christianity. When it arrived in Russia from Byzantium in the 980s, Christianity encountered a developed, original culture with its own mythology, pantheon of gods and popular beliefs and rites. This culture in turn had its roots in even more ancient layers of human religious and mythological consciousness, which, I believe, was the source also of the images and spiritual culture of the Aborigines. Arriving in Russia, Christianity did not destroy this culture, but absorbed and reworked it. In time there came to obtain a system of 'dual belief', a compromise between paganism and Orthodoxy.

Russian icon painting, while retaining much in common with the Byzantine, differed from it in reflecting the syncretic nature of popular Orthodoxy. The Christian Son of God absorbed features of the Slavonic pagan god Dazhbog the Sun and icon painters reflected the image of Christ the Sun. Perun, another cosmic divinity, god of thunder and fire, was transformed into the biblical prophet Elias. Icon painters showed Elias against a background of heavenly fire, emphasising, as it were, his fiery nature, his connection with storm and tempest. The wheel seen on icons of Saint Elias is a symbol of the sun and of fire. In the icon *'The Fiery Ascension of Elias the Prophet'* (see above), the wheel appears as the huge disc of the sun drawn by horses of fire. This is the prophet's chariot, in which he drives across a flaming sky.

The cult of the Slavonic divinity Volos (or Veles), which may have arisen as early as the Palaeolithic as a cult of the master of beasts and later as the patron of domestic animals, was, as Christianity spread, transferred to Saint Vlas. Adopting the functions of Volos, Vlas became patron of cattle and as such he appears in icons, normally surrounded by the flocks and herds under his protection.

Features of Khors, the sun god on his horse, were transferred to Saint George. In icons, Saint George was shown on horseback in a flying scarlet cape reminiscent of his solar nature. At the same time George embodies the life-giving spring, having acquired features of Yarilo, the Slavonic god of vernal fertility. Saint George's day in Russia was celebrated in April, the traditional day for cattle to be driven out onto the fresh grass. The horse was the symbol of that day. Saint George's association with the horse, so striking in icon painting, has a pre-Christian origin. In the legend Saint George appears in combat with the serpent, vanquishing the Chthonic monster. In icons, he is shown spearing a dragon or a serpent of fantasy. Interestingly, in Aboriginal myths and art we see a triumphant serpent, while in Christian legend, reflected in icon painting, the serpent is defeated and humiliated. In Aboriginal myths and art the serpent appears as a rainbow in the sky; Saint George strikes down a creature of the underworld. Its sad fate seems to symbolise the defeat of paganism and the triumph of Christianity. Even where Russian icon painting is permeated with pre-Christian, folk motifs, it bears witness to the triumph of the new vision.

Russian popular Christianity has much in common with the popular Christianity of the Aborigines and their work on Christian subjects. As earlier in Kievan Russia, in Australia Christianity encountered the original and complex culture of the native population with a history going back for many millennia. Christianity not only absorbed the ancient, pre-Christian system of religion and myth, but itself experienced its powerful influence. The Aborigines absorbed Christianity, transforming it in accordance with their traditional notions, introduced it into their own system of ideas and images and made it *their* religion (for a typical manifesto of this new religious awareness see Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997).

Modern Aboriginal art is clear evidence of the manner of their acceptance and absorption of Christianity. It shows the Christian legend and teaching refracted in the minds of the artists, while traditional means are put to use in their expression, resulting finally in a remarkable organic fusion.

Let us look at how Jesus Christ's Road to Calvary is depicted by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann in her painting *'Stations of the Cross'* (Crumlin 1991:plates 20–21; see also Derrington 2000). The Daly River artist

boldly introduces into her work elements of traditional symbolism. The heads of Christ and other characters are presented as concentric circles; the faces and bodies of the people burying Christ are painted in ceremonial fashion. Beside Jesus there is a huge serpent, a mystical being which plays a fateful role both in Aboriginal myths and in the Bible, the Rainbow Serpent and the mysterious creature of Eden. Introducing this image, the artist wished to express the idea of the death of Christ overcoming the forces of evil. In other terms, she attempted to convey one of the key notions of Christianity by means of pre-Christian symbolism held in common by Aboriginal culture and the creators of the Bible.

In traditional culture, the Rainbow Serpent is not only the bearer of destruction, but also a symbol of rebirth and transfiguration, as it is in a Yirrkala artist's painting, Mawalan Marika's *'Crucifixion'* (Crumlin 1991:plate 9). In the centre is Christ crucified; above him is the serpent; on both sides of Jesus are the robbers on their crosses. In the upper part of the painting is another figure of Christ ascending to Heaven on wings. In the top corner he appears in the tomb. In the one painting we see the juxtaposition of events which take place at different times and the combination of two dimensions - the real (Golgotha) and the metaphysical (the soul of Jesus ascending to Heaven). As we know, this is typical of Russian icon painting too. The serpent in the painting is the traditional, archetypal symbol of rebirth and transfiguration. Its inclusion in the crucifixion subject has, as in the previous painting, deep symbolic significance.

'The Crucifixion of Jesus', a painting by Groote Eylandt artist, Naidjiwarra Amagula, shows Christ on the cross surrounded by an aura (Crumlin 1991:plate 10). The subject of the death and the immortal, divine nature of Christ is dominant in the painting, a subject close to icon painting and expressed in the same language of symbols - the aura emanating from Christ. The same artist has a painting entitled *'The Ascension of Jesus'*, but which in reality, taking the evidence of its basic content, represents the Transfiguration (Crumlin 1991:plate 12). In the centre is the figure of Christ surrounded by an aura, as he appears in Russian icons on the Transfiguration.

Tony Swain wrote down a Warlpiri Aborigine's account of his dreams. In one he saw the heavenly Jerusalem and Jesus Christ seated in Heaven and observing the world below. Red rays, 'like torches', emanated from his throne and coloured the world red. In another the Aborigine saw the earth again coloured red; he felt lightning strike and with it Jesus entered into him. Christ, as the Aborigine sees him in his dream, is seated on his heavenly throne exactly as he is depicted in Russian icons, and from his throne emanate the same brilliant rays as in icons - symbols of Christ's divinity and power (Swain 1988:462). Christ sends this power to the Aborigine in the form of lightning striking him, exactly as spirits penetrate the body of an Aborigine undergoing initiation as a sorcerer, placing within him magic crystals which sparkle like lightning. In this connection I would like to recall that certain Aboriginal groups associate the brilliance in their art with ancestral power. For the Yolngu, the brightness in their paintings emanates from the *wangarr* beings themselves and is imbued with their essence (Jones 1990:28-9; Morphy 1996). Christianity and traditional religion are organically combined in these dreams, reflecting some syncretic religious state typical of an adherent of Christianity who has not yet cast off the religious legacy of his ancestors. It is embodied in images typical of Russian icon painting, so remote in spatial terms, yet typologically so close.

Aboriginal artists' works on Christian subjects are like waking dreams, the dreams of an Aboriginal who has only the day before become a Christian. His work and icon painting, a reflection of Russian popular Christianity, can occupy the same page in the history of art. What has been happening in Aboriginal communities in Australia in the twentieth century and what happened in Russia centuries ago are two processes, typologically identical, by which ancient ethnic religions are overcome by a new religion aimed at all people and nations equally, for which 'there is neither Greek nor Jew', a religion striving to cross ethnic, cultural and racial bounds and encompass the world. In the process specific, ethnically coloured forms of Christianity take shape. Only in these forms, perhaps, can it survive.

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