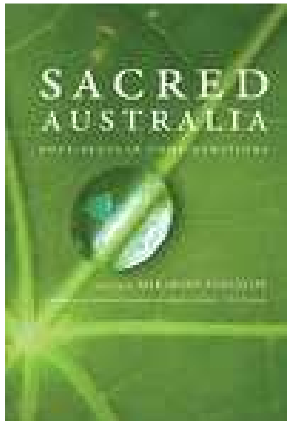


## BOOK REVIEW

**Paranjape, Makarand ed. *Sacred Australia: Post-Secular Considerations*. Melbourne: Clouds of Magellan, 2009.**



In this challenging and thought-provoking collection of essays by leading academic writers, artists and commentators, the idea of sacred Australia is explored through literature, art, architecture, aboriginal studies, sacred geography and a range of cultural phenomena from sport to performance art.

The book includes works by Bill Ashcroft, Peter Boyle, John Bradley, Mark Brett, Geoff Cheong, Frances Devlin-Glass, John Docker, Dennis Haskell, Sudhir Kumar, Anne Marsh, Freya Mathews, Peter Murphy, Makarand Paranjape, Deborah Bird Rose, Graham Seal, David Tacey, and Claudia Terstappen.

There is general accord among the authors that Australia is, superficially, a very secular country. They also agree that measures of overt religious practice do not reflect the breadth of the search for spirituality that is occurring in Australia; unlike America, where church attendance is used as a measure of religiosity/spirituality, Australian spirituality is more covert and low-key. In Australia this widespread spiritual quest is reflected in: literature, especially poetry; an interest in Aboriginal stories and sacred sites; awareness of the land and the environment; secular rituals like those of Anzac day. In her essay Mathews posits that Australians experience a "split between 'transcendence', a conscious commitment to modernity, to the certainties of our European heritage, on the one hand, and a subconscious surrender to the authority of the landscape that patently exceeds us, on the other".

A number of writers address theoretical concerns: Paranjape explores the notion of sacred Australia for white Australians, Aboriginal people, and recent immigrants; Tacey examines Australian character and spirituality; and Ashcroft considers the sacred in Australian culture.

Focussing on sacred Australia in literature, Haskell discusses "The sardonic and the secular" in Australian poetic language; Kumar reads Les Murray's "Walking to the Cattle Place" through Ghandi's vision of art, action and aesthetics; Devlin-Glass explores the radicalised self, ecology and the sacred in Xavier Herbert's "Poor Fellow My Country"; Docker critiques the link between the sacred and violence in the writings of Patrick White.

Some authors consider facets of Aboriginal spirituality: the ethics of country; sovereignty and treaty in religious imagination; the sacred in Yanyuwa country. Still others chapters are interdisciplinary and focus on the Sydney Opera House, shamanism, sport, and Anzac day.

Looking to the future of a "sacred Australia", David Tacey predicts that a new religious vision in Australia will emerge from two sources: "firstly, thinking people in the religious traditions who manage to deconstruct their traditions to make traditional wisdom available in new ways; and secondly, leading-edge scholars in the scientific and philosophical traditions who seek to find spirit and depth in the world, and to make this accessible to public imagination and general knowledge."