

predominantly “nasty, brutish and short,” to quote Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* about man’s life in a state of nature, as opposed to civilization.

Today, in the context of a more enlightened post-modern age and a shift away from ethnocentric and racist thinking, spirituality is considered to be the very essence of Aboriginal life. Discussion focuses rather on whether it is more appropriate to speak of Aboriginal religion or spirituality, and to debate what religious/spiritual aspects are validly and generally applicable to the diversity of peoples and cultures that make up Aboriginal Australia. It is relevant to this discussion to remember that at the time of European contact there were some 250 distinct nations and languages (up to 600 dialects) in the continent, covering the full gamut of ecological niches and environments.

*A holistic world view.* The first fact that strikes the student of Aboriginal cultures is that there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane, between religious and secular living, between mind and matter, between humans and nature. Such contrasting dualities are inconsistent with a world view which is essentially inclusive and holistic. This is not to deny the importance of paired concepts and complimentary dualities such as male-female, moieties or paired kinship groups, associations between generations, paired totems or linked mental constructs. But in the Australian aboriginal world view, humans and all aspects of human endeavor, all animal and plant species, and all physical phenomena, from the night sky to the seasons and lightning, are regarded as equal manifestations of a timeless spiritual or cosmic order whose origins, meaning and integrity are not open to challenge (Gostin and Chong, p. 123).

This world view and its interpretation form part of a body of knowledge that is itself seen as an extension of the cosmic order and comprises the accumulated wisdom of a given group, handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth since time immemorial. This does not mean that the body of knowledge is changeless or finite, but rather that change and additions become incorporated into the collective wisdom of the group (Gostin and Chong, p. 123-4). Individuals acquire this knowledge progressively and cumulatively during a lifetime punctuated by periods of formal and intense learning described as going through the Law. Knowledge is acquired both by imitation in day to day contact with peers and older persons, and by bestowal by specialist older persons. The latter often takes place in a