

Buddhism and the New Age by Vishvapani

ON MAY 25TH 1880, Madame Helena Petrova Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, took the three refuges and the five precepts from a Buddhist priest in a temple in Galle, a coastal town in Sri Lanka, before a large crowd of Sinhalese. 'When we had finished the last of the Silas and offered flowers in the customary way', Olcott wrote in his diary, 'there was a mighty shout to make one's nerves tingle'. (1)

He and Blavatsky were the founders of the Theosophical Society, one of the most influential religious movements of the late 19th Century and in this ceremony Olcott became the first American and Blavatsky the first European (2) formally to convert to Buddhism. The twin legacies of Theosophy are the introduction of Buddhism to the West and the amorphous set of beliefs and practices which have come to be known as 'the New Age'.

Buddhism and the New Age have been associated ever since, converging spectacularly in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960's. In a recent paper Denise Cush concludes that 'there is a close, entangled and ambiguous relationship between British Buddhism and the New Age' which 'can be traced back to a common ancestor in Theosophy'. (3) This entanglement has led to popular identifications of Buddhism as a part of the same movement as the New Age; the assumption on the part of many 'New Age' people that Buddhism supports their views; and the subtle influence of New Age attitudes and assumptions on Buddhists' understanding of their own tradition.

Nonetheless, Buddhism and the New Age are very different. They have emerged from very different histories, travelling on different historical trajectories and based on different philosophical assumptions. Cush identifies a changing relationship over the last two decades between British Buddhist groups and New Age activities from 'closeness to a conscious differentiation, followed by a diversification of approaches'. The initial closeness derived from the influence of the counter-cultural trends of the 1960s is thrusting both Buddhism and the New Age to prominence. The period of separation occurred as Buddhists sought, in the 1970s and 1980s to establish their own identity. But by the 1990s alienation from conventional religion, party politics and the conditions of consumer-capitalist society have generated renewed interest in both movements throwing them together once more. With the increased size and confidence of Buddhist movements in the West, Buddhists are in a position to explore ways of working alongside others and the last few years have seen a number of Buddhist initiatives in New Age venues. But what are the issues involved in this renewed encounter?

1. THE NEW AGE

THE INDEFINABILITY OF THE NEW AGE is at the heart of its nature. Is it a coherent entity, or simply a catch-all phrase describing essentially separate developments? There is no definitive set of beliefs or practices which are held in common by everyone to whom the term may be applied, but something is clearly happening. What are the distinguishing

characteristics of the phenomenon we call New Age? What are the underlying attitudes and assumptions of which New Age practices are expressions?

Most commentators date the emergence of a distinctive New Age philosophy from the work of the American Theosophist Alice Bailey (1880-1949) which blended occultism, spiritualism and apocalyptic vision with the prevailing Zeitgeist. As Dell deChant comments:

'The New Age is the product of mid-20th century America. It becomes noticeable in the late sixties and ever more pronounced since then as its chief carrier, the 'baby-boom' generation' continues to experiment with beliefs and ideologies which are, at best, distinct from those of capitalism, mainline Christianity and participatory democracy. Its most obvious origin is found in the work of Alice A Bailey'. (4)

Many New Age activities found in Britain have their origin in the USA and the UK has, in any case been subject to similar trends. But rather than attempting to account for the forms the New Age has taken or comparing New Age activities with Buddhist ones it is more important to discern their respective philosophical bases and underlying attitudes. A British New Age Creed is offered by William Bloom of St. James Piccadilly, which gives a starting-point for deducing these.

1. "All life-all existence-is the manifestation of Spirit, of the Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness known by many different names in different cultures.
2. The purpose and dynamic of all existence is to bring Love, Wisdom, Enlightenment into full manifestation.
3. All religions are expressions of this same inner reality.
4. All life, as we perceive it with the five human senses, or with scientific instruments, is only the outer veil of an inner, causal reality.
5. Similarly, human beings are two-fold creatures-with an outer temporary personality and a multi-dimensional inner being (soul or higher self).
6. The outer personality is limited and tends towards materialism.
7. The inner personality is unlimited and tends towards love.
8. Our spiritual teachers are those souls who are liberated from the need to incarnate and who express unconditional love, wisdom and Enlightenment. Some of these beings are well-known and have inspired the world religions. Some are unknown and work invisibly.
9. All life in all its different forms and states, is interconnected energy-and this includes our deeds, feelings and thoughts. We therefore work with spirit and these energies in co-creating our reality.

10. Although held in the dynamic of cosmic love, we are jointly responsible for the state of ourselves, of our environment and of all life.

11. During this period of time the evolution of the planet and of humanity has reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness. This is why we speak of a 'New Age'. (5)

The Religion of the Self

Bloom's creed is characterised by its emphasis on 'inner reality' as the source of meaning and value. But in what sense, one might ask, is this reality 'inner'? It must be that it pertains to experience and in this way it overlaps with the 'inner personality'. But experience has been universalised and, with the substitution of a capital letter, love becomes 'Love' and wisdom, 'Wisdom'. This implies a substratum of existence which is 'Unknowable' and indescribable, but at the same time is crucial to the philosophy which follows (which is the cause of the vagueness and indeterminacy of so much New Age discourse). These are mystical beliefs which are neither rationally elaborated nor theologically defined, but which may-possibly-be experienced. 'Spiritual' qualities are separated from the 'outer' world of actions and ethics except where that world is redefined in spiritual terms: 'All life-all existence-is the manifestation of Spirit, of the Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness'. In a similar way 'all religions are expressions of this same inner reality'.

This, then, is the 'religion of the self'. At its heart is a Rousseau-esque sanctification of 'Inner being' which is outside history, innocent, pure, but nonetheless authoritative. And there is plainly no question of examining the assumptions out of which 'inner being' might be constructed. In practice, this results in a recurrent concern with personal experience. In psychological terms, the New Age speaks the language of individualism while in philosophical terms it speaks the language of immanence, at times implying a monistic metaphysic. These characteristics underlie its remaining features.

Eclecticism

The variety and all-inclusiveness of New-Age activities is perhaps its most remarkable feature. Organisationally there is deep mistrust of institutions and a preference for non-hierarchical models of operation. This is informed by a bias against rational thought or systems of belief and towards intuition and 'holistic paradigms'. But in practice the extent of New Age eclecticism suggests that the particular activity a New Ager chooses to participate in is secondary to the question of what they get from it, what it does for them, how it makes them feel.

New Age as a Market Sector

Another factor influencing the eclecticism of the New Age is its role within consumer society. Ethnic art and music, traditional medicines, handicrafts and clothes expand the range of consumer options. Markets exist in ideas (which can be obtained via books, magazines and seminars) and in experiences (which can be bought through workshops,

therapies and retreats). And market forces will define as 'New Age' whatever can be sold as such (or alternatively, whatever cannot be sold as anything else).

For the consuming New Ager these phenomena offer the prospect of perpetual novelty on one's own terms. If you don't like the goods, you find another supplier. Where there is an acknowledgement that commoditisation means a qualitative erosion there is a compensatory stress on compression and intensity:

Enlightenment in a weekend workshop.

Carrying this a stage further, one branch of the New Age discards counter-cultural orientations in favour of 'prosperity teachings' (money as energy, life and empowerment; poverty as self-hatred). As the Sanyassin slogan had it 'Jesus saves, Moses invests, Bhagwan spends'. This is spiritualised materialism masquerading as materialised spirituality.

Neo-Paganism-the Decontextualisation of Tradition

New Age-ism is predicated on dissatisfaction with Christianity and an attempt to find alternative forms of spirituality. It is informed by the revival of non-Christian spiritual traditions such as Wiccan, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, Egyptian religion and the Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Sufism all of which are cheerfully added to the eclectic mix.

But eclecticism should not be confused with openness. The self-orientation and spiritual consumerism of the New Age impose their own agenda and its approach to paganism as natural religion and animism is informed by modern perspectives. Thus the sense of the sanctity of the natural world augments both ecological concerns and the view of the self as natural and pure. The pagan notion of the immanence of gods, powers and spirits coheres with modern (and sometimes quasi-scientific) interest in psychic phenomena. Ancient mythologies inform psychologically derived 'personal myths' and the cult of the Goddess provides feminism with a deity. Gaia does all these things for everyone.

The New Apocalypse

A final strand is the belief that mankind is or may be entering a New Age-a golden age of spiritual awakening governed by new paradigms of thought. This can be seen as an outgrowth of Christian apocalypticism shorn of the Christian eschatological imagery-Armageddon, the return of Jesus and images from the Book of Revelation. In its place are symbols from (for example) astrology (the Age of Aquarius), biology (the evolution of the human race), parapsychology (harmonic convergence), occultism (the influence of the spiritual masters of Theosophy and Scientology who preside over the world) and science fiction (where the spiritual masters may inhabit UFOs).

Some of the judgmental qualities of traditional eschatology live on in the notion that we are faced with a choice between a New Age and ecological or nuclear catastrophe. For the most part, however, there is a utopian and optimistic sense that the movement into the

next phase of mankind's development is inevitable. In this respect the New Age is reminiscent of the Marxist and socialist utopias and indeed they have historical roots in common. However, the New Age has turned against the Marxist philosophy of revolution and socialist engagement. Alienation from conventional politics has been one of the principal factors in its development which displaces its idealism into an inconceivable future to be attained, in Bloom's words, by 'a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness' rather than through tangible reforms. In the UK the political movements which have influenced the New Age have mainly been concerned with protest and opposition-especially CND, Animal Liberation and the environmental pressure groups.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Christian theology distinguishes between immanence and transcendence as ways of describing the manner in which God is related to the world. Immanence denotes God's indwelling and omnipresence in the world while transcendence indicates a God who is infinitely above and beyond it. As Bloom's concern with 'inner reality' suggests, New Age discourse tends to be expressed in terms of immanence. 'Self-religion' finds meaning within; paganism sees the world as ensouled while apocalyptic utopianism envisages a variation on the theme of heaven on earth.

2. BUDDHISM AND THE NEW AGE

THEOSOPHY AND ITS NEW AGE OFFSPRING have been central influences in the construction of Western views of Buddhism which Mme. Blavatsky favoured as 'incomparably higher, more noble, more philosophic and more scientific than any other church or religion'⁷.

In particular the esoteric interests of the Theosophists underlie the contemporary attraction of the tantra and Tibetan Lamas-whose true progenitors are perhaps the Mahatmas who communicated telepathically with Mme. Blavatsky. As AP Sinnet wrote in true orientalist fashion in *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), 'Ceylon concerns itself merely with morals, Tibet, or rather the adepts of Tibet, with the science of Buddhism'. (7)

The Buddhist Society of London was founded in 1924 as a lodge of the Theosophical Society and Christmas Humphreys, its president, retained a commitment to Mme. Blavatsky's teachings throughout his life. (8)

Sangharakshita, too, was decisively influenced by Theosophy through his reading, at the age of fourteen, of Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* which brought him to a realisation that 'I was not a Christian-that I never had been and never would be'. However, enthralled as he was by the book, its effect was 'almost entirely negative' (9) and it was overwhelmed by his reading of Buddhist texts on which he realised 'that I was a Buddhist and always had been' (10). This set him on an Eastward trajectory, to encounters with Buddhism in the land of its origin.

When Sangharakshita and other experienced Buddhist teachers arrived in the West in the 1960s they had been preceded, and in some respects pre-empted, by the Theosophically-influenced versions of Buddhism popularised by Humphreys and Alan Watts and enthusiastically travestied by Lobsang Rampa and the Beats. In these ways, Buddhism overlapped with the New Age which, in many respects has continued to support its spread. Buddhist books are sold in New Age bookshops, Buddhist teachers frequently appear in New Age magazines and meditation has become widely popularised. In return Buddhism has provided New Age thinkers with a wealth of images, terms, concepts and texts.

The two movements were also connected by their counter-cultural principles. This association was deeply invigorating for British Buddhism and enabled the FWBO, for example, to cast off the staid and middle-class character of the previous generation of British Buddhists and distance itself from the ossification of much Eastern Buddhism. Buddhism is intrinsically 'alternative' in the West in that it offers an alternative to Christianity and to the many forms of materialism. For this reason a kinship exists between Buddhists and the world-views and counter-cultural experiments of the New Age. But 'identity is the vanishing point of resemblance', as Wallace Stevens says, and this kinship should not be allowed to obscure the profound differences. In an atmosphere of eclecticism, minorities can thrive: vegetarians are no longer considered cranks and neither are Buddhists. But Buddhists should beware of being added to the New Age soup-vegetarian or not.

If it is difficult to define the New Age, it is perhaps no less difficult to define Buddhism, but unless we can be clear what is distinctive about Buddhism we will be at the mercy of endless compromises and obscurations. I suggest that at the heart of the many expressions of the Dharma is a concern with the Truth, the full realisation of which is conterminous with Enlightenment. This emphasis runs contrary to the common Western perception of Buddhism as a path of progressively intensifying spiritual experience. That is to say, Buddhism is seen as a form of mysticism and mysticism is understood in terms of experience. In an address to a conference of 'scientists and mystics' Sangharakshita was at pains to stress that he identified himself with neither party:

'To me as a Buddhist, terms such as 'mystic' and 'mystical' are in fact quite strange, even alien, not to say repugnant, and in speaking and writing about Buddhism I prefer to avoid them'. (11)

This does not mean that Buddhism is not concerned with experience, but it does not see experience-even mystical experience-as an end in itself. When mysticism is turned into a philosophy it becomes monism-the belief in an underlying unity between all phenomena within the context of a metaphysical absolute, mysticism being the personal experience of such an absolute. Buddhism seeks to avoid all such absolutisation and reification and to understand experience in a broader, non-dualistic context:

'One might say Science represents an extreme of objectivity and reason whereas Mysticism represents an extreme of subjectivity and emotion... Science seeks to reduce

the subject to the object, Mysticism to absorb the object in the subject. Buddhism, following here as elsewhere a Middle Way, represents a dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy in a blissful non-dual Awareness wherein... 'that which is exterior coincides with that which is interior'. (12)

In a similar vein, in a lecture on 'Enlightenment as Experience and Non-Experience' Sangharakshita proposes that we think of the spiritual life not in terms of experience, but in terms of the metaphors of growth, work and duty. (13) The 'Truth' to which a Buddhist aspires has to be lived, felt and seen and it is likewise the Truth of his or her experience, but this is not the same as saying that it is experience. This is a crucial point of divergence from the New Age, as 'the religion of the Self'. For Buddhism there is no abiding Self or soul which is not subject to change.

The Buddhist concern with Truth is fundamentally at odds with the eclecticism and relativism of the New Age and Buddhists have to make distinctions between teachings and traditions which the New Age is happy to mix together. 'Truth' here does not refer to the various doctrinal expressions of the Dharma which Buddhist tradition does not consider to be ultimately 'true' in themselves. But such expressions are nonetheless considered indispensable means to Enlightenment and for this reason Right Understanding is the starting point of the Eight-fold path. It is therefore incumbent upon Buddhists to clarify their own views and to distinguish which of the views they encounter are compatible with the Dharma.

Thus a Buddhist cannot agree that 'all religions are essentially expressions of the same inner reality'. Sometimes this stance is urged on Buddhists with the coercive pressure of a theological correctness, but Buddhism does not even regard itself as 'an expression of reality'. It sees its own teachings and practices as means of creating conditions which conduce to the perception of reality and Buddhists will judge other teachings by the same criterion. Where there are differences of belief and practice Buddhists need to ask (in the ample spirit of friendly dialogue and tolerance) whether other religions, philosophies and spiritual paths are based, ultimately on one of the two essential 'wrong views': nihilism and eternalism. For example, in his belief in 'spirit' and 'the Unknowable' Bloom proposes a metaphysical substratum underlying and uniting all phenomena. A Buddhist analysis will see this, like Bloom's belief in a 'soul or higher self', as a form of eternalism-not to say as disguised theism. Alternatively, some manifestations of the New Age proceed on the assumption that true happiness is possible if we can but change to this diet, use this ethnic medicine, align these energies using those crystals, amulets, or charms, or take up a particular form of alternative medicine, martial art, or therapy. The suggestion that ultimate satisfaction can be found in a physical training or a particular form of therapy is essentially materialist and a Buddhist analysis will interpret them as a form of nihilism. Similarly problematic is the belief that all religions are simply differing forms of 'spirituality'. Such an approach will see the Buddhist tradition as one resource among others from which an individual can draw. But why should one chose Buddhist spirituality rather than Christian, feminist or 'earth' spirituality when they are all just different kinds of experience and are all equally true/false/useful? If we simply take what we want from Buddhism we are in danger of ignoring the aspects which are

uncomfortable and challenging-in other words, those parts of the tradition which will force one to change.

For this reason it is important that Buddhism is presented in a way which makes it clear that it cannot be incorporated into a life which is otherwise unchanged or subsumed innocuously into a New Age mix. Like the New Age, Dzogchen, Tantra and Zen tend to use the language of immanence: the doctrine of Buddha nature, the idea that we are already Enlightened-and the approaches to practice which follow from this-are all examples. In a cultural context which asserts subjective experience above universal values and where consumption is a primary mode of being such teachings are open to misinterpretation. An alternative approach-using the language of transcendence-asserts that we are not presently Enlightened (and, in fact that we are primordially deluded), that we need to change ourselves if we are to become Enlightened and that Buddhism is a path from delusion to Enlightenment, from Samsara to Nirvana. Some approaches will work and others will not, but one cannot say, with the New Age, that all approaches are equally valid. Buddhists cannot agree that they are helping to prepare for the Golden Dawn and the Age of Aquarius. A Buddhist approach to politics and society has to rest on *pratiitya samutpaada*, the principle that 'all things arise in dependence upon conditions'. Speaking of the FWBO Subhuti writes in *Buddhism for Today*:

'there are... no millennial illusions. No golden age is at hand. The modern world is too complex and too pluralistic to be transformed in that way'. (14)

However, Buddhists can work for meaningful change. As at any other time in history it is possible to create conditions which are more conducive to human well-being and allow the possibility of spiritual development. But this development takes place individually, not en masse in the manner of a totalitarian state or imperial expansion. As Subhuti says, 'empires deny individuality and breed their own expansion'. There is a Buddhist saying that 'Samsara is endless' and any belief that a utopian full-stop can be placed at the end of history will strike Buddhists as naïve escapism, speaking more of the *fin de millennium* fear of social collapse than of spiritual aspiration.

In spite of this the theosophical heritage lives on among contemporary Western Buddhists in the continuing idealisations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, which Donald Lopez dubs 'new age orientalism'. He has in mind the fantasy version of Tibet:

'exalted as a surrogate self endowed with all that the West lacks. It is Tibet that will regenerate the West by showing us, prophetically, what it can be by showing us what it has been. It is Tibet that can save the West, cynical and materialist, from itself. Tibet is seen as a cure for the ever-dissolving West, restoring its spirit'. (15)

This Tibet is shrouded in snows and mystery in equal measure, secreted behind the Himalayas in the most inaccessible region of the world: the last abode (now cruelly displaced in its turn by the Chinese shadow of Western materialism) of legendary beasts, magical powers and perennial wisdom. To the extent that Western followers of Tibetan Buddhism perceive it in this way they merge into New Age appropriations of that

tradition. The Dalai Lama, the Bardo Thödol and, to a lesser extent, the idea of tantric initiation all figure prominently in New Age mythologizing.

As an articulation of fantasy compensations for psychic inadequacy the New Age movement is not a cure so much as a symptom. Over fifty years ago W.H. Auden prophesied a New Age apocalypse in a long work called 'For The Time Being'. Herod is contemplating the impending massacre of the innocents. He does not want to issue the order because, as he says 'I am a liberal. I want everyone to be happy'. But civilisation is already crumbling:

'I have tried everything. I have prohibited the sale of crystals and ouija boards; the courts are empowered to sentence alchemists to hard labour in the mines; it is a statutory offence to turn tables or feel bumps'.

What he fears is a future where:

"Reason will be replaced by Revelation.... Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions-feelings in the solar plexus induced by under-nourishment, angelic images generated by fevers or drugs. Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of school-children ranked above the greatest masterpieces.... Idealism will be replaced by Materialism. Life after death will be an eternal dinner-party where all the guests are only 20 years old... Divine honours will be paid to silver teapots, shallow depressions in the earth, names on maps, domestic pets. The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids'. (16)

This is the icy hell of subjectivity whose inmates, relativizing truth, can speak only to themselves or of themselves to each other. Is it a portrait of the New Age? So elusive a phenomenon can never be adequately defined, but the characterisation I have suggested implies an ideology of underlying assumptions-the religion of the self, eclecticism and social fantasy-whose influence extends far beyond the many-tentacled reach of its institutions and organisations. Buddhism, too, contains underlying assumptions and has a distinctive approach which derives from them. These distinctions must be insisted upon however useful Buddhism and the New Age may be to each other and however much certain formulations of Buddhism may conceal the differences. This is not to say that the people one meets in New Age contexts are necessarily definable in its terms: the New Age is where people start looking when they want an alternative to conventional society. There may well be ways in which the two can live together. Buddhists might see the New Age as a kind of contemporary ethnic religion which can co-exist with Western Buddhism as tribal and national traditions co-exist with Eastern Buddhism. But Buddhists must retain a sense of the universality of their own tradition and of the extent to which it surpasses the New Age frameworks which will seek to define it. One has only to think of the absorption of Indian Buddhism by Hinduism to see how such a relationship can break down. Denise Cush suggests that the New Age, needing to be grounded in a tradition, *'could root itself in a Western form of non-sectarian or Mahayana Buddhism'.* (17) One sees something of the sort already taking place in the USA. However, Buddhists will

insist that what passes as Buddhism is true to its name.

Finally the New Age is not paganism. It is a modern (or even a post-modern) phenomenon; it is a symptom of rootlessness, not a restoration of roots. The New Age seeks to consume traditions such as Buddhism as resources for personal experience. In these respects it embodies a *reductio ad absurdum* of contemporary liberalism in the realm of religious belief and practice. A New Age Buddhism would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Buddhist tradition; it would be a Buddhism constructed from Western fantasies of the East and post-Christian yearnings for salvation. As Stephen Batchelor comments:

'Today the fear of invasion is more one of psychological and social breakdown than of external invasion. instead of Theosophy, there is now the New Age, another resurgent Gnostic/Romantic fantasy that claims Buddhism as its own, just as Mani did in the Third century and Mme. Blavatsky in the 19th. But the Dharma will remain unheard as long as its voice is drowned out by the clamour of these irrational and eclectic yearnings'. (18)

Buddhism in the West is growing out of old traditions, but it should not simply consume those traditions according to modern agendas and discard them as worthless husks. Western Buddhists are attempting to create a new tradition - a tradition of Western Buddhism within which individuals can develop beyond subjective experience, can grow through activity and engagement and finally come not just to follow the Truth, but to embody it.

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Notes

01. How the Swans Came to the Lake R. Fields, London 1986, p.97

02 The Awakening of the West, S. Batchelor, London, 1994 p. 269.

03 British Buddhism and the New Age, D. Cush, unpublished paper.

04 Taproots of the New: New Thought and the New Age, D. deChant, in The Quest, Vol 4 No.4 1991, Wheaton, Illinois, p72.

05. The New Age in Cultural Context', P. Heelas, in Religion Vol 23 No 2 April 1993, p104. Heelas also develops the idea that the New Age is 'the religion of the self'.

06. Batchelor, loc cit.

07. R. Fields, p98.

08. S. Batchelor, p 316

09. Learning to Walk, Sangharakshita, Glasgow, 1990 p.91

10. Ibid. p118.

11. The Priceless Jewel, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow 1993 p142. Delivered as an address to The Wrekin Trust conference on Reality, Consciousness and Order in 1983.

12. Ibid p144.

13. The Taste of Freedom, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1990 p87ff.

14. Buddhism For Today, Subhuti, Glasgow 1988 p174.

15. New Age Orientalism: the Case of Tibet', Lopez, in Tricycle; III, 3; 1994 p 43

16. For the Time Being', Auden W.H., in Collected Longer Poems, London 1968, pp187-9.

17. D. Cush, op. cit.

18 S. Batchelor, p 271.