Book Review


T. G. H. Strehlow (1908–1978) was a linguist who studied the Arrernte peoples of Central Australia. Having spent a large part of his childhood living on the Hermannsburg Mission outside of Alice Springs (he grew up amongst Arrernte children and was a native speaker of the Arrernte language), Strehlow was considered an ‘insider’ by the Indigenous communities he studied. As such, he won the trust of Elders who became his informants and gave him access to secret-sacred ceremonies and objects. Strehlow’s role as a custodian of Indigenous secrets and his subsequent publication of this highly sensitive information agitated ‘outsider’ critics who viewed his work as a violation of Indigenous trust, and by the time of his death Strehlow had many detractors. In Restoring the Chain of Memory, Cox attempts to repair Strehlow’s reputation by re-establishing him as a phenomenologist of religion and by arguing that his work was founded on an admirable intention: the preservation of traditional Indigenous religious knowledge that would otherwise have been lost to the forces of modernity.

The first chapter provides the context by covering Strehlow’s personal biography, a brief overview of the Arrernte peoples, and sections on three of Strehlow’s main biographers and critics. In the second chapter Cox discusses the theory that underpins his study, in particular, the work of French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger and her idea of religion as a ‘chain of memory’. He applies this theory to the demise of Indigenous religions: what happens when the chain of religious memory is broken by forces such as colonisation, missionary influences, and governmental interference? Does Indigenous religion cease to exist in these conditions, and if so, can it be restored? Cox argues that Strehlow himself raised these very questions (albeit in a very different context in the early to mid-twentieth century) and concluded that radical social changes had indeed resulted in a loss of religious memory across generations of the Arrernte peoples. Cox posits that it was the threat of permanent loss that
drove Strehlow to amass his own vast collection of traditional Indigenous material (much of the controversy surrounding Strehlow was a result of how he and his wife chose to manage this collection) and to publish secret-sacred information.

The next three chapters analyse Strehlow’s work and attempt to summarise his contribution to advancing the understanding of Arrernte religious traditions. Chapter 3 outlines Strehlow’s descriptions of Arrernte creation myths, totemic ancestors, and his interpretation of the concept of ‘Dreamtime’, a term that has arguably been widely misinterpreted (p. 53). Chapter 4 discusses how Strehlow related Arrernte origin myths to the critical role of totemic ancestors via a social and ceremonial structure that he termed ‘personal monototemism in a polytotemic community’. Chapter 5 focuses on Arrernte religion in practice and describes and analyses some of the ceremonies that were included in Strehlow’s ‘magnum opus’, *Songs of Central Australia* (1971). This book contains some of the most sensitive information derived from Strehlow’s research, including detailed descriptions of Arrernte rituals and English translations of secret-sacred songs (p. 82). Cox defends Strehlow by positing that the primary aim of the book was to facilitate a better understanding of the Arrernte religion amongst uninformed outsiders and to correct earlier misconceptions that these traditions were ‘evidence of a stone-age mentality that was doomed to die out, along with the people who practised the rituals and the traditions that sustained them’ (p. 83).

Strehlow believed that by the mid-1950s there was an ‘almost total dissolution’ (p. 114) of traditional Arrernte religious knowledge and chapter 6 evaluates the likelihood of this claim in light of later data, including evidence gathered from Cox’s own interviews (conducted in 2013) and from Land Claims hearings that occurred in Central Australia. After taking a ‘brief detour’ to consider Strehlow as a phenomenologist of religion (chapter 7), Cox returns to the theme of loss in Indigenous memory (chapter 8) where he analyses how Strehlow’s work is being used in current repatriation efforts. He demonstrates how the Strehlow Collection (housed at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs) is being repatriated to contemporary Indigenous Elders who are using the knowledge to educate a new generation of young Arrernte people. The final chapter returns to discussions of religious studies theory and considers the contribution to knowledge made by Strehlow during his forty years of research; specifically how his collected work functions both as a knowledge source for Indigenous communities and as a significant contribution to the contemporary academic study of Indigenous religions.
In sum, *Restoring the Chain of Memory* is an important contribution to the study of Indigenous religion in Australia and worldwide. Cox’s thesis is well argued and Hervieu-Léger’s ‘chain of memory’ provides an elegant framework for the consideration of this incredibly complex and highly sensitive subject. This book should restore some balance to Strehlow’s own reputation by bringing the focus back to the original intentions behind his work: to enlighten a wide audience about Indigenous religions, to restore to the Arrernte people traditional knowledge that had been forgotten, and to function as ‘a living source’ of information that can be interpreted in new and creative ways by future generations of Indigenous Australians (p. 163). *Restoring the Chain of Memory* will appeal to those with an interest in Australian Aboriginal religions, the anthropology of religion, and theoretical and methodological issues in the study of Indigenous religions.

Anna Lutkajtis
University of Sydney