



## *Unearthly Powers*

Why was religion so important for rulers in the pre-modern world? And how did the world come to be dominated by just a handful of religious traditions, especially Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism? Drawing on sociology and anthropology, as well as a huge range of historical literature from all regions and periods of world history, Alan Strathern sets out a new way of thinking about transformations in the fundamental nature of religion and its interaction with political authority. His analysis distinguishes between two quite different forms of religiosity – immanentism, which focused on worldly assistance, and transcendentalism, which centred on salvation from the human condition – and shows how their interaction shaped the course of history. Taking examples drawn from Ancient Rome to the Incas or nineteenth-century Tahiti, a host of phenomena, including sacred kingship, millenarianism, state–church struggles, reformations, iconoclasm, and, above all, conversions are revealed in a new light.

ALAN STRATHERN is an associate professor of history at the University of Oxford, and tutor and fellow in history at Brasenose College, Oxford. He is the author of *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth Century Sri Lanka: Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land*, and coeditor with Zoltán Biedermann of *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*. He was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize in History in 2010.

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Alan Strathern  
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# Unearthly Powers

Religious and Political Change  
in World History

ALAN STRATHERN  
*University of Oxford*



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## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

There is not much of Sri Lanka in the pages of this book, but it bulks large in the much longer, slower formation of thought that culminates here. Yielding to the narrative temptations of hindsight, let us put it like this: my experiences there as part of the extended family of my wife (as she became) from the mid-nineties onwards taught me much more about how religion works than my research as a doctoral student of its sixteenth-century past. In my encounter with the reality of Theravada Buddhism, I sensed a strikingly radical version of what I would later think of as transcendentalism: at once radiant and unforgiving. And yet at the same time, the majority of day-to-day religious life and conversation was of an entirely different order: deity supplications, astrologer consultations, healing rituals, buried charms, baleful curses, theatrical exorcisms, the evil eye – an omnivorous, eclectic, untheorised, and deeply practical approach to getting on in life. This was the true surprise (if this was what life was like in Weber’s ‘enchanted garden’, I had evidently been living hitherto far beyond its walls). Here, the dead reappeared in dreams, or at the driveway gate at dusk, or hid in the top of a tree; fortunes were told in the flames of a fire; numerologists predicted the recovery of a stolen bag of A-level revision notes with complete accuracy; gods appeared unbidden at bedroom windows in the night to demand that oaths be fulfilled by sacrifice. Christian churches were vehicles for this appetite too, as in St. Anthony’s in Colombo, where a crowd of people from all religious backgrounds were let in after the formal service was over to propitiate the figures of the miracle-generating saints, streaking their glass cases with their beseeching touch. (A sign admonished devotees that it was not appropriate to offer *puja* to the Virgin Mary.) Even Buddhist monks: while my father-in-law was growing up in a small village near Anuradhapura, an occasional visitor to the house was the Kondadeniya Hamuduruwo, famous nationwide for his

awesome powers of magical protection and attack, courted and feared by the most senior politicians.<sup>1</sup>

Still, on another level, Buddhism remained a tradition of sublime disregard for such matters, and it was and is unquestionably hegemonic in several important ways. It has certainly been fundamental to any understanding of politics: in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese presence placed serious inducements to baptism before Sinhalese princes, to which some responded, but yet the foundational place of Buddhism ensured that conversion would come at the cost of a serious loss of legitimacy. This was one of the findings of my first book. Partly as a result, Sri Lanka did not succumb to Christianity any more than it did to Islam. But I knew that in other times and places, rulers had been able to *enhance* their authority, over the longer term, through their conversions to monotheism. Why? Indeed, why more generally have certain regions proved astonishingly vulnerable to the march of the world religions? I was born in Papua New Guinea, to anthropologists who worked in the highlands; this was a world in which no transcendentalist traditions had entered until the missionaries arrived and spread their creeds like wildfire in the twentieth century. The island became one of the most Christian countries on the planet – in world historical terms, within a mere blink of the eye.

Therefore, what emerged after my DPhil work was a concern, first expressed in a journal article in 2007, to understand why it was that ruler conversion should be a critical means by which the world religions expanded in many parts of the world, but was simply anathema in others.<sup>2</sup> This question is now properly answered in a companion volume, *Converting Kings*, which compares specific cases where rulers sought to adopt or reject Christianity: Kongo 1480–1550; Japan 1560–1600; Ayutthaya (Thailand) 1680–1690; and Hawaii 1800–1830. All my work on these cases was written up before I worked on this volume, and has greatly shaped its content. This book has a much wider remit than its companion and a quite different methodology, but readers will find that they exist in constant dialogue with each other.

The project had thus yielded two books, but I am most conscious of what has been left out. A proper examination of how best to deploy the concept of the Axial Age could not be included. In particular, nowhere

<sup>1</sup> On the latter, also see Gunaratne 2017; Stirrat 1992: 93.    <sup>2</sup> Strathern 2007b.

in the present volume do I properly explain how Confucianism, Hinduism, and Judaism might or might not fit into the paradigm of transcendentalism. Apart from constraints of space, their absence reflects an early decision to leave China and India out of my four major case studies, and a very late decision to cut an appendix. I can only say that my thoughts have often returned to the complexities and opportunities involved in this exercise. While Chapters 1–3 compare Buddhism and Christianity as transcendentalisms, the remaining chapters largely use the latter to think about how transcendentalism spreads. It is a deferred ambition to show how the expansion of Buddhism could be analysed similarly. Thematically, I had to exclude consideration of the role of ‘cultural glamour’ in shaping the context for ruler conversions, and defer the issue of intellectual debate.<sup>3</sup> I have not explored here the role of resistance, popular scepticism, or the hidden transcript in any substantial manner. Equally, the contribution of apparently more ‘secular’ qualities of legitimacy – vaguely universal principles of good governance, justice, or dynastic breeding, for example – and their relationship with the religious sphere, has only been alluded to occasionally. In no sense do I preclude their significance: this book is concerned with the relationship between religion and power, rather than assuming that power is always about religion.

As for what does remain, readers will perceive that the range of literature drawn upon here goes far beyond what is attempted by any sensible historical monograph. Although I have sought to compensate for my lack of specialist expertise in all these areas by circulating chapters to the readers listed below, and as much as I have striven to the contrary, surely errors and infelicities will remain; at the very least I will be dependent on interpretations that split opinion at the level of specialist research. To make the avoidance of such sins the overriding task of intellectual enquiry, however, would be never to attempt a project of this scale.

\* \* \*

Institutionally, I have to record my greatest gratitude to the Leverhulme Trust: the award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize in 2010 allowed me complete freedom to decide how I would spend two years.

<sup>3</sup> To CK.

In 2011–2013 I therefore completed most of the work for Africa, Oceania, and Japan, much of it destined for the companion volume. With this and subsequent work on Thailand behind me, I was now in a position to apply to the British Academy, which awarded a one year Mid-Career Fellowship, 2016–2017, in which the whole of this volume was written. I am most grateful, therefore, to the support of both bodies. I spent that year in Singapore, and part of that time as a visiting senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute. This provided an excellent setting in which to engage scholars of Asia and was rather formative in coming to terms with certain conceptual issues. I particularly note my encounters with Ken Dean, Peter A. Jackson, and others noted below, and remain grateful to Prasenjit Duara for his support and conversations over the years.

But most important for their support and toleration have been my colleagues at Brasenose and St. John's Colleges in Oxford: Abigail Green, Rowena Archer, Lesley Abrams, William Whyte, Hannah Skoda, Leif Dixon, George Southcombe, Manjusha Kuruppath, Tom Marsden, Kevin Fogg, Helen Gittos, and Simon Smith. I have been lucky to have these people around me. This book, in fact, has its very first origins in Cambridge, and while I cannot list all my colleagues there, I'd like to record how vital the late and greatly lamented Chris Bayly was in encouraging my ambitions to think broadly and in supporting this book in its first formulation. Incidentally, the sheer range of topics both Cambridge and Oxford expect its lecturers to teach have surely enabled this book in quite different way. I am grateful too, to the History faculty at Oxford for their facilitation of research leave. Of the many congenial colleagues there I will single out Aileen Mooney for her wonderfully valuable assistance with all matters related to funding. This included support from the John Fell Fund for the means to employ Lucy Hennings for her excellent assistance with the bibliography and index. Cambridge University Press saw the merit of this project at a very early stage, and I am especially grateful to Lucy Rhymer for taking care of it during a long period of surface dormancy and shepherding it smoothly into its two-book format.

My debt to Marilyn Strathern is, of course, incalculable. To mention only the most elementary levels, she has read an entire draft, and acted as an unparalleled conversational route into what I consider as 'immanatism'. It is difficult to express the significance of Vic

Lieberman in my development: a model of fearless global comparative scholarship, a tireless reader and critic of my work, and an extremely valuable and generous source of wisdom. Joan-Pau Rubiés has been a touchstone and mentor in my career for even longer, and also provided incisive comments that have helped shaped the form of this book. Azfar Moin read the bulk of the manuscript, but more importantly has become an ideal source of inventive, theoretically alive, and broad-minded discussion.

Apart from the above, many others read and commented on drafts of particular chapters. Although they appear in a list, I feel a very personal sense of gratitude to and intellectual engagement with each of these readers – who, of course, cannot at all be associated with the inadequacies that remain. The Introduction and Chapter 1 were read by James Davidson, Will Sweetman, Edoardo Siani, Giuseppe Bolotta, Ben Schonthal, William Whyte, Roger Albin, Yoni Brack, Joel Robbins. Tomas Larrson and Alastair Gornall read these together with Chapter 2. John Watts read Chapter 3, Charles Stewart and Joel Robbins read Chapter 4, and Jonathan Shepard read Chapters 5 and 6.

The following provided more particular help with various points: Jonathan Bardill, Nicole Brisch, Nicholas Thomas, Robin Whelan, James Raeside, Richard Gombrich, Lesley Abrams, Lynette G. Mitchell, Stefano Zacchetti, and Peter B. R. Carey. Another army of regional specialists helped with the cases in the companion volume and will be acknowledged there. I must only record here particularly unstinting help from John K Thornton, the late J. D. Y. Peel, Chris Baker, and Kanda Chisato.

I'd like to record a special debt to Marshall Sahlins, whose influence on this book should be obvious, and who regularly sent me copies or oral papers and works in progress. Many of these were recently published, in collaboration with David Graeber, in *On Kings*. This came out after the first complete draft of *Unearthly Powers* was written, and in Graeber's contributions I found much that chimed with my understanding of how 'immanentist' or divinised kingship worked.

Nilmini Dissanayake has been an abiding source of fascinating conversation about Buddhism and much more general support. My wife, Samantha Dissanayake, once pointed out to me the resemblance between Sahlins's model of the stranger-king and the origin myth of Sri Lanka, which set several balls of intellectual enquiry rolling. Without her, in sickness and in health, this book could never have appeared:

this book is dedicated to her with love. My two children, Leela and Aril Strathern, have never known me not to be working on this project, but they have brought joy and purpose of a more transcendent kind.

\*\*\*\*

Biblical quotations are from the New International Version. Unless otherwise stated, Pali quotations are from [suttacentral.net](http://suttacentral.net), where I have privileged the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi. Diacritics have not been used for Pali words that have a reasonable independent life in English.