

## J. G. Frazer and Religion

Robert Ackerman

Clare Hall, University of Cambridge

2015

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Ackerman, Robert, 2015. "J. G. Frazer and Religion", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : [article598.html](http://article598.html)

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site ([www.berose.fr](http://www.berose.fr)) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 26 April 2024 at 06:58

Before I turn to the life and work of Sir J. G. Frazer, I'd like to offer a few general observations that should be understood as the basis for everything that follows. The first is that evolution was the master idea underlying and pervading the study of all the social sciences in Britain from the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 to at least 1914, along with its associated belief in the seeming inevitability of progress of humanity. I assume that everyone here today has grown up with an understanding, at some level of detail, of evolution as the great law of organic life. But for Frazer's generation - he was born in 1854 - it wasn't a topic in a science course or the subject of a TV program as it is today but more like a psychological and moral earthquake. Evolution was brand new, and thinking about it meant being forced to re-examine all one's ideas about the meaning and purpose of life.

In 2009 we marked the bicentenary of Darwin's birth and the passage of a hundred and fifty years since the publication of *The Origin*. If we rewind back a century to 1909, that fifty-year milestone was also of course marked and celebrated. Here is how Jane Ellen Harrison, a Cambridge classical scholar and a contemporary of Frazer's, put it in introducing a volume of essays entitled *The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religions* : "The title of my paper might well have been 'The Creation by Darwinism of the Scientific Study of Religions' but that I feared to mar my tribute to a great name by any shadow of exaggeration." [1] Today all but Scriptural literalists accept Darwinian evolution as both true and all-encompassing.

Second, Frazer, like all scholars, was the intellectual beneficiary of those who had come before him. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the traditional chronology that held that the world was created in 4004 BC was being undermined, the very idea of the

dimensions of the past was changing. The new concept of prehistory was gaining acceptance because of the discoveries of the archaeologists, digging in the lands of the known historical civilizations - Greece and Rome, Mesopotamia and Egypt - as well as revealing wholly new cultures, like the Hittites and the civilizations of South America.

Third, the great greedy surge in the decades before World War One on the part of European powers for colonies and markets in what we now call the Third World had as a by-product a torrent of ethnographic information pouring into all the imperial capitals. Hitherto unknown parts of the world were now being opened up by explorers, soldiers, traders, and missionaries. Frazer's great work *The Golden Bough* could not have been written before the end of the 19th century because the data for his innumerable cultural comparisons did not yet exist.

Finally, the terms "anthropology" and "primitive" as employed in Frazer's day are to be understood as enclosed everywhere within inverted commas because their meaning has been completely transformed over the last hundred years. Frazer was the greatest example of what were called "armchair anthropologists." He sat in the Wren library in Trinity College Cambridge for ten to twelve hours nearly every day, fifty weeks a year, reading and digesting the world's anthropological literature, checking proofs, and expanding the book on which he was working. It was Frazer's own professional protégé Bronislaw Malinowski who in the years on either side of the First World War created the protocol and practice of fieldwork as a necessary rite of passage for would-be anthropologists and in so doing revolutionized the discipline. As for "primitive," it is obvious that some cultures are more advanced technologically than others, but that is a world away from the notion of the primitive as denoting people with a essentially different mentality from those existing today.

Now to the man. Who was Frazer and why are we talking about him today ? [2] He was born in Glasgow on New Year's Day 1854, and brought up in a pious Free Church home ; his parents were among those who took part in the great secession from the Church of Scotland in the 1840s. [3] He made a brilliant record at the University of Glasgow, which led his father Daniel Frazer to send him to an English university for further study. For Daniel there was still a whiff of John Henry Newman and High Anglicanism about Oxford, so instead he chose to send his talented son to Trinity College Cambridge. The father, a prosperous Glasgow pharmacist, had been poorly advised because Trinity College was probably the epicentre of evolutionary and secularist thought in Britain at the time, and therefore the place most likely to undermine a young man's faith. And indeed, at some time during his teenage years he jettisoned it. Frazer repeated his outstanding academic performance at Trinity - in the Tripos final examination he was second classic for his year - and in 1879 was awarded a six-year college fellowship. In the early 1880s then, he was seeking a classical project in which he might immerse himself and by which he might make his name in the scholarly world. In 1884 he had just begun what was supposed to be a two-volume translation and commentary on Pausanias, a Greek traveller of the 2d century CE whose description of "the glory that was Greece" before it was devastated by earthquake and conquest is the most complete that has

come down to us. At this point he met the man who played the largest part in causing him to believe that anthropology might shed some light on classical antiquity.

That man was an even more brilliant jewel in Scotland's intellectual crown, the theologian and historian of Semitic religion William Robertson Smith. Smith was another son of the Wee Free church, an intellectual prodigy who already at the age of twenty-three was professor of Hebrew and Old Testament in the seminary run by his church in Aberdeen. Having studied theology in Germany, he returned to Scotland as a missionary for biblical criticism, the basic assumption of which was that the Bible, far from being literally the inerrant Word of God, was in fact the result of a lengthy and complex redaction of a number of earlier documents and was thus amenable to the same kind of analytic close reading that had been developed over centuries of study of classical texts. Smith was also the co-editor of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and as such took it upon himself to offer in the articles "Angel" and "Bible" a survey of this new way of understanding the Scriptural text. His fundamentalist coreligionists, most of whom had never even heard of biblical criticism, unsurprisingly reacted with shock and horror at the idea that this man was preparing their own sons for the ministry, and accordingly Smith became the defendant in the last significant heresy trials in Britain. Although these concluded in a legal stalemate, in the end he became too notorious for Scotland and migrated south to become professor of Arabic at Cambridge. Thus it was that he met and befriended his somewhat younger fellow Scot, James George Frazer, in the Trinity College senior common room in 1884.

Smith as editor was always looking for contributors, and he saw that Pausanias did not occupy every spare hour in Frazer's day. He quickly recruited his new friend. In those days the encyclopaedia came out as completed, a volume or two at a time, and had already arrived at the letter "P," which is why Frazer's contributions are all on topics toward the end of the alphabet. As Smith came to realize how intelligent and hard working Frazer was, he assigned him two fateful articles, "Taboo" and "Totemism" ; from that point onward Frazer never looked back.

The encyclopaedia articles, however, were indications of things to come, but also something of a diversion. Frazer kept working away at Pausanias, which grew and grew under his hand, as did all of his major works ; it finally appeared in 1898, fourteen years after he had started, in six large volumes [4]. As well as offering descriptions of art and architecture, Pausanias was something of an amateur ethnographer himself, with a special interest in customs and beliefs that persisted in the countryside long after they had died out in Athens. The combination of Pausanias's own folkloristic curiosity and the extensive comparative reading he had himself done in preparation for the encyclopaedia articles convinced Frazer that his new interest in anthropology was not only worthwhile in itself but might well shed light on the classical text, light that was available from no other source. Specifically, as opposed to the worship of the shining Olympian sky-gods we read of in Homer, the Greek rustics encountered by Pausanias seemed mainly to engage in making animal sacrifices to mysterious and often malicious subterranean beings in order to mollify and thus divert them

from carrying out mischief or worse, and as such their superstitious behaviour seemed to resemble that of the “savages” described by modern explorers and missionaries and also of the benighted peasants who still populated much of the European countryside.

In 1888 Frazer put Pausanias aside temporarily to write a book whose subject was a curious rite that, we are told, took place in a certain grove at Nemi, outside ancient Rome. According to the Roman commentator Servius, if a runaway slave managed to reach the grove, he could remain there until challenged in combat by the next runaway ; if the new arrival defeated the former “king of the grove,” he would then reign in his place until the next challenge, and so on. Over the next 25 years this book, *The Golden Bough*, would undergo a huge expansion (from two volumes in 1890 to three in 1900 and no fewer than twelve volumes in 1911-15), and would even become (in the one-volume abridgement that Frazer himself prepared in 1922) what might be called the first anthropological best seller ; even more remarkably, the abridgement has never gone out of print. Although in its final form the work left the strange goings-on at Nemi far behind and went on to present an encyclopaedic survey of the ritual and mythology of the entire “primitive” world, its basic thesis did not change much. Frazer accepted the idea, proposed in 1871 by E. B. Tylor, that the process of evolution was just as active in our mental and spiritual lives as in the material products of our industries and institutions [5]. Frazer, who was interested exclusively in the development of the mind, saw this evolution as passing through three distinct, sequential stages, which he characterized by the world-view that they allegedly embodied - the first, magic, in which priests in the ancient worshipping community believed that they could compel the gods to do their bidding by offering a quid pro quo in the form of animal sacrifice ; this yielded to what he called religion, once the priests and the community, having regretfully accepted that they were indeed unable to compel the gods to do anything at all, instead prostrated themselves and beseeched the divine powers by means of prayer and sacrifice to aid feeble humanity ; and finally positive science, by means of which, having understood and accepted our true position in the (godless) universe, we rational beings could at last put behind us the fear and trembling arising from the foolish notions that had survived from earlier stages.

Frazer more or less single-handedly created the audience for anthropology among educated readers. It is not hard to see why. He began with the advantage of a subject guaranteed to hold his audience (that is, the origin and meaning of ancient religion and its presumed relation to Christianity), presented it in a highly polished literary style, and brought to it the industry and erudition traditionally associated with nineteenth-century German scholarship, as evidenced by the numerous footnotes to be found on every page. Notwithstanding these thickets of notes, which are supposed to stand for and guarantee an objective or “scientific” method, however, it was not difficult to discern a secularist agenda. At the literal heart of the twelve-volume edition of *The Golden Bough* lies a lengthy analysis of the cults of Attis, Adonis, Osiris, and Dionysus, all of them dying-and-reviving gods, that characterized the religions of the ancient eastern Mediterranean. Although not a word was said about Jesus of Nazareth, only the slowest reader could fail to notice the missing member of this geographically contiguous set. If Attis, Adonis, and the others were examples of either

plain ignorance or of an imperfect understanding of the natural cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth, what then was Jesus, and what therefore was Christianity? The antireligious message did indeed get communicated subliminally, and in fact the Frazer papers at Trinity College contain many letters from readers otherwise unknown to him who thank Frazer for stripping away the mystification surrounding religion and permitting them to see it for the worn-out thing that it was.

Starting with the publication of the second edition of *The Golden Bough* in 1900, Frazer's reputation began a long decline. His anthropological contemporaries rejected what they regarded as his arbitrary definitions of the key terms "magic" and "religion" and the rigidity of his pattern of mental evolution. Classicists continued to esteem his purely classical work, such as the commentary on Pausanias (and later the editions of Apollodorus and Ovid), but also continued to object that the emphasis on the long sweep of evolution devalued the miracle of Greek achievement. Even as he came increasingly to be seen as irrelevant by most of his professional peers, however, his popularity with the educated audience only grew, and *The Golden Bough* in its full twelve-volume majesty as well as the one-volume abridgement, and later books such as *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, commanded attention and respect throughout the 1920s and later. [Readers of T. S. Eliot's modernist classic *The Waste Land* (1922) may recall his assertion, in a footnote, that his diagnosis of the post-war malaise could be understood only by those thoroughly familiar with *The Golden Bough*.]

Frazer revered facts for their own sake and hoped that his work would survive as a storehouse of information even after his speculations and theories had been superseded. Although he was appropriately sceptical about his sources, and certainly held some of his informants in much higher regard than others, in the end he was confident, or at least hopeful, that the "facts" on which he based his suppositions were accurate and as such constituted hard, unchanging pebbles of reality. He was undone by his lack of awareness (which he shared with most of his contemporaries) that the data represented the replies to specific questions that were imbued by the particular interests and prejudices of those asking and reporting them. But it is unfair for us to criticize him for lacking our own critical sophistication. In his own time, it was not his methodological naiveté that undid him. Rather, it was his lack of interest in psychology and sociology that caused other anthropologically inclined British classicists to look elsewhere for intellectual models. When he died at the age of eighty-seven, in 1941, the war was raging and it proved extremely difficult to find anyone, either among anthropologists or the fellowship at Trinity, ready and willing to write his obituary, so remote did he seem. Yet in the first quarter of the twentieth century every educated person in the English-speaking world could be assumed to have more than a passing acquaintance with *The Golden Bough*.

I mentioned at the beginning of my talk that evolution at the end of the nineteenth century was widely understood to be an alternative to, and adversary of, religion. Today we are familiar with the aggressive atheism of Richard Dawkins and his fellow missionaries. For Frazer and his contemporaries who had been raised in a religious household, even though

they were convinced of the futility of religion, that enlightenment was achieved at a personal price. I'd like to end by quoting for you a longish passage taken from the preface to the second edition (1900) of *The Golden Bough* [6]. Here Frazer for once does not shelter behind the screen of footnotes and the objectivity of the scientific method. "But the comparative study of the beliefs and institutions of mankind is fitted to be much more than a means of satisfying an enlightened curiosity and of furnishing materials for the researches of the learned. Well handled, it may become a powerful instrument to expedite progress if it lays bare certain weak spots in the foundations on which modern society is built - if it shows that much which we are wont to regard as solid rests on the sands of superstition rather than on the rock of nature. It is indeed a melancholy and in some respects a thankless task to strike at the foundations of beliefs in which, as in a strong tower, the hopes and aspirations of humanity through long ages have sought a refuge from the storm and stress of life. Yet sooner or later it is inevitable that the battery of the comparative method should breach these venerable walls, mantled over with the ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations. At present we are only dragging the guns into position : they have hardly yet begun to speak. The task of building up into fairer and more enduring forms the old structures so rudely shattered is reserved for other hands, perhaps for other and happier ages. We cannot foresee, we can hardly even guess, the new forms into which thought and society will run in the future. Yet this uncertainty ought not to induce us, from any consideration of expediency or regard for antiquity, to spare the ancient moulds, however beautiful, when these are proved to be out-worn. Whatever comes of it, wherever it leads us, we must follow truth alone. It is our only guiding star : *hoc signo vinces*."

Frazer here sees himself as a melancholy artilleryman, conscripted into the army of science, and resolved to push ever onward regardless of what it may cost. Despite the subsequent eclipse of his standing among anthropologists today, Frazer and H. G. Wells must rank as the most important advocates of secularism in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century.

### Bibliography

---

Ackerman, Robert

—J. G. Frazer : *His Life and Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

—*The Myth and Ritual School : J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists*, New York, Garland, 1991.

Frazer, James G.

—*The Golden Bough*, 2d ed., London, Macmillan, 1900.

—*Pausanias's Description of Greece*, London, Macmillan, 6 vols., 1898.

Frazer, James G. and Gaster, Theodor H.

*The New Golden Bough*, New York, New American Library, 1959.

Harrison, Jane Ellen

“The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion,” in A. C. Seward (ed.), *Darwin and Modern Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1909.

Smith, William Robertson

*The Religion of the Semites*, 3rd ed., S. A. Cook (ed.), New York, Schocken Books, 1972, orig. ed., 1889.

Tylor, E. B.

*Primitive Culture*, London, John Murray, 2 vols., 1871.

***Pour citer cet article :***

Robert Ackerman, “J. G. Frazer and Religion”, in *BÉROSE, encyclopédie en ligne sur l’histoire des savoirs ethnographiques*, Paris, IIAC-LAHIC, 2015.

---

[1] Jane Ellen Harrison, “The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion,” in A. C. Seward (ed.), *Darwin and Modern Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1909, pp. 494-511.

[2] The biography is Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[3] See Ackerman, pp. 5-12.

[4] *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, 6 vols., London, Macmillan, 1898. All Frazer's publications, with a very few exceptions, were published by Macmillan in London.

[5] E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols., London, John Murray, 1871.

[6] “Preface to the Second Edition,” pp. xxi-xxii.