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E. B. Tylor and the Anthropology of Religion

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In light of the retrospective theme of this Annual Meeting, it is fitting that we pay homage to Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917). His appointment as Reader in Anthropology at Oxford in 1884 was the first academic appointment of an anthropologist *qua* anthropologist in the English-speaking world. And in his two volume classic, *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor, as Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952:150-151) observe, "was deliberately establishing a science by defining its subject matter."

Yet although Tylor is not far removed from us in time, and while he writes in a language very similar to our own, we might nevertheless take note of Lesley Hartley's lines, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (*Prologue, The Go-Between*, 1953). Despite Tylor's pleasing and seemingly lucid prose, his concerns, sensitivities, and insensitivities do not fully match ours. If we are to improve our scholarly understanding and appreciation of his efforts, we must try to learn as best we can what Tylor was against as well as what he advocated, and what he hoped to achieve within the context of the intellectual ambiance in which he operated.

Thus, for example, Tylor's theorizing was motivated in significant measure by his disagreements with degenerationist theories of the religions of so-called "savages." He hoped to replace such views with an evolutionary, progressivist perspective on the development of human religiosity. Yet while we can recognize the importance to Victorians of arguments about whether or not some contemporary religions were degenerations from so called "higher" forms of religiosity, we cannot, I think, cathect such arguments to the same extent, or in the same ways, that Tylor did.

Tylor's evolutionary account, as is well known, largely deals with the development of what he calls "the intellectual...side of religion" (1958 [1873, 1871], II:444-445), to the explicitly confessed near-neglect of other important aspects of religion. He justifies this by declaring that

Scientific progress is at times most furthered by working along a distinct intellectual line, without being tempted to diverge from the main object to what lies beyond, in however intimate connexion....My task has been here not to discuss Religion in all its bearings, but to portray in outline the great doctrine of Animism, as found in what I conceive to be its earliest stages among the lower races of mankind, and to show its transmission along the lines of religious thought. (1958, II:445).

But in attempting to portray "the great doctrine of Animism" and "to show its transmission," Tylor does far more than outline a theory of the evolution of religion. As his work unfolds, J. Samuel

Preus observes,

we see that Tylor is writing the history of the mind. Repeatedly, he refers to his project as describing "the course of mental history," the "laws of intellectual movement," the history of laws of mind," the "history of opinion," "intellectual history," and so on. (1987:133).

Marvin Harris (1968:202) opines that "the basic point of *Primitive Culture* seems to be that the human mind has the ability to perfect itself by thinking more clearly." And George Stocking (1987:192) waggishly remarks that in Tylor's presentation, "It was as though primitive man, in an attempt to create science, had accidentally created religion instead, and mankind had spent the rest of evolutionary time trying to rectify the error."

But beyond treating the evolution of religion as window on the development of mind and culture, Tylor suggests an even more ambitious agenda. Research into the history and pre-history of humankind and "the doctrine of the world-long evolution of civilization," he writes, have their "practical side, as *a source of power destined to influence the course of modern ideas and actions*" (1958 II: 529, emphasis added). It is "the practical office of ethnography," Tylor declares,

to make known to all whom it may concern the tenure of opinions in the public mind, to show what is received on its own direct evidence, what is ruder ancient doctrine reshaped to answer modern ends, and what is but time-honoured superstition in the garb of modern knowledge" (1958 II: 531).

Apposite to Tylor's sense of "the practical office of ethnography" is his concept of "survivals." He conceptualizes these as cultural elements or complexes ("adhesions") that once made a certain sense within the contexts in which they were developed, but that have lingered on beyond their time and are out of intellectual harmony with later cultural settings. These stultifying elements, Tylor declares, need to be identified so that they might be eliminated. He concludes his great work with this ringing -- and radical -- declaration:

It is a harsher, and at times even painful office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old cultures which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less *urgently needful for the good of mankind*. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, *the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science*. (1958 II:539, emphasis added).

II

In Tylor's view, as A.I. Hallowell was fond of pointing out in lectures, our ancient forebears were moved by curiosity. Puzzled by their experiences of dreams and of visions, and desirous of achieving a satisfying account of death, they derived and melded from their experiences notions about animating principles and ghost-souls. Then, by a process that we call stimulus generalization, they extended the idea of individual souls out from humanity to the non-human world. By a further extension they developed ideas about independently existing spirits of various sorts. They thus propounded the two complementary parts of "the great doctrine of Animism," belief in souls and belief in other spiritual beings..

Tylor supposes that the theory of animism is the first great theory in human history. Not only that, but it is so powerful and appealing that it has continued on in a variety of elaborated and modified forms, and may be discerned in the Christianity of his own time.

The beliefs and practices of savage religion," Tylor affirms in the first volume of *Primitive Culture*, are far from being "a rubbish heap of miscellaneous folly." Rather, they are "consistent and logical in so high a degree as to begin, as soon as even roughly classified, to display the principles of their formation and development" (1958 I: 23). Yet while "these principles prove to be essentially rational," they work among "savages" "in a mental condition of intense and inveterate ignorance" (1958 I 23). Indeed, the great doctrine of animism is founded on inadequate observation and childlike inference, though the product of rational minds.

Animism, Tylor suggests, illustrates not only the rational yet error-prone nature of human thought, but also a human propensity, especially well marked among so-called "savages," to rest understandings closely on experiences. Tylor, as Robert Lowie points out (1948 [1924]:109), derives the theory of animism "very largely not from ratiocination about observed phenomenon but from the immediate sensory testimony of dream life."

Two further observations about Tylor's perspective can be usefully entered at this juncture. One is about his views on what others have called "the psychic unity of humankind." The other has to do with the implications of his theory of human religiosity for the religions of his time -- and ours.

Both in his *Researches Into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) (Stocking 1987:160) and in *Primitive Culture*, Tylor supports the idea of the psychic unity of humankind. Though he does not employ that expression in his theorizing about religion, the concept is crucial for his application of the comparative method. As Preus (1987: 138) notes,

Tylor's confidence that he can understand the savage mind because it is essentially rational is the basis for his conviction that he can understand the continuity of human religiousness from the earliest times in which it affords a glimpse of itself.

In the matter of the implications of Tylor's theory respecting religions in modern society, suffice it to summarize the conclusions reached by two major contemporary scholars. The logical thrust of *Primitive Culture*, Stocking writes (1987:195), is "clearly to reduce Christianity to the same category of 'mythology' with which Tylor prefaced his discussion of the development of animistic belief." And Preus maintains that we may conclude from Tylor's great work that "*religion itself is a*

survival" (1987: 139, emphasis added).

III

Taylor's theory of religion has come in for strong and diverse criticisms. Thus, for example, Evans-Pritchard dismisses Taylor's speculations about the origins of soul and spirit concepts as having "the quality of a just-so story" (1965:25); Durkheim rejects the possibility that religion, an enduring phenomenon, could be founded on an illusion; and Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Margaret Hodgen enter their various criticisms of Taylor's "doctrine of survivals."

Overall, many critics note that Taylor slights the social and emotional dimensions of religion. Later anthropologists, of course, emphasized religion's social aspects and consequences, with such regularity and redundancy, indeed, that in 1966 Clifford Geertz (1966:1-2) complained that still more cases addressed to the same functionalist points might well convince people within and without our profession "that anthropologists are, like theologians, firmly dedicated to proving the indubitable." The emotional dimension of religiosity, however, has not been developed with the same intensity and cogency, despite the efforts of some analysts. Studies thus far undertaken, however, suggest that affectivity can play havoc with Taylor's "doctrine of survivals," for, as Spiro (1984:338) succinctly puts it, "Many apparently arbitrary cultural propositions make sense in terms of emotions."

While many of the specifics of Taylor's theorizing are unacceptable to us today, we might nevertheless appreciate his reformer's impulses. Those, of course, were grounded in, and focused on, Victorian intellectual controversies. But if we abstract his impulses from that foreign country which is the past, we might say that Taylor's approach to religion can be broadly described as "criticism," in analogy to contemporary literary criticism. Such criticism, despite a number of fiercely competing theories about what it should be and what we might hope of it, generally attempts to *interpret*, to *situate*, and to *appropriate* for some purpose. Taylor did not talk about "religious criticism" as such. But his effective efforts in that direction, I think, are of greater interest and relevance to anthropologists than those of Harold Bloom.

Bloom does talk about religious criticism, which he describes as "a mode of description, analysis, and judgment that seeks to bring us closer to the workings of the religious imagination" (1992:21). Yet while that sounds promising, Bloom soon tells us that just as the literary criticism that he learned to practice "relies finally upon an irreducibly *aesthetic* dimension," religious criticism analogously "must seek for the irreducibly *spiritual* dimension in religious matters or phenomena of any kind" (1992:21). Talk of an irreducible spiritual dimension, however, reminds us of Mircea Eliade and others who assert unconvincingly that religion rests on something irreducibly religious, such as "the sacred" or "the transcendent," and that religion is therefore "autonomous" and "*sui generis*."

While Taylor held that religion universally rests on animism, he was far from claiming that religion is autonomous and *sui generis*. Rather, in his view it arose from a welter of sensory and psychological factors. Although "the animism of lower tribes," Taylor holds, is "self-contained and

self-supporting," for it is maintained "in close connexion with the direct evidence of the senses on which it appears to be originally based," and so seems to explain itself (1958 II:84), it is not founded on some irreducible religious disposition. The lack of such foundation is further attested to by the development of mind and the evolution of culture. The "doctrines and rites of the higher races," Tylor writes, "show survival of the old in the midst of the new," and, indeed, "*abandonment of the old because it is no longer compatible with the new*" (1958 II:84, emphasis added). "For our knowledge of our own history," Tylor muses,

it is deeply interesting that there should remain rude races yet living under the philosophy which we have so far passed from, since Physics, Chemistry, Biology, have seized whole provinces from ancient Animism, setting *force* for *life* and *law* for *will* (1958 II:269, emphasis added).

Finally, for those of us who might aspire to the broad sense of criticism given earlier, and who do so from a secular stance, Tylor send us a message from the past. In secularism, he declares, "the feeling and imagination which in the religious world are bound to theological belief, have to attach themselves to a positive natural philosophy, and to a positive morality" (1958 II:536). It is here, I suspect, that our contemporary anthropology of religion is most deficient, especially as potentially significant criticism.

We have not really agreed among ourselves about the larger purposes and commitments of contemporary research, and that weakens us as a scholarly community. I have elsewhere argued that considerations of purpose ought to shape our analytical categories (Saler 1993), and that pragmatic argument can be extended, I think, to our professional identities. If that *mélange* of startling lights and disconcerting shadows that some call postmodernism has convinced us of anything, it ought to have convinced us that there is no such thing as the disinterested pursuit of truth. But what, then, are our interests?

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