

FRAZER, Sir James George (1 January, 1854 – 7 May, 1941)

James Frazer was a Scottish classicist, social theorist, anthropologist, and historian of religion. He was a Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge University. In addition to his influential entries in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (e.g., “Taboo,” “Totem”), Frazer published voluminous translations, editions, and monographs in the fields of classics (e.g., *Pausanias’s Description of Greece* [1898], an edition of Ovid’s *Fasti* [1929]), religion (e.g., *Lectures on the Early History of the Kingship* [1905], *Totemism and Exogamy* [1910]), and biblical studies (e.g., *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* [1918]).

Frazer is best known for his massive enterprise in comparative religion and mythology, *The Golden Bough* (*GB*). Although it was originally published in two volumes (1890), *GB* subsequently expanded into three volumes (2nd ed., 1900), and then into twelve volumes (3rd ed., 1911-15). An abridged volume was published in 1922 and a thirteenth volume (*Aftermath*) appeared in 1936. Although *GB* is marked by copious data woven into numerous digressions and excursions, it revolves around the ritual slaying of the priest of Diana who kept watch over the sacred tree in the grove of Nemi. In this tradition, if a runaway slave broke off a branch of the sacred tree—which Frazer identified both with the golden bough mentioned in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the mistletoe plant—and killed the priest, that slave would become the priest until he himself was slain. Frazer understood the priest as a king who represented the god Virbius and embodied the well being of the community. As a comparatist in the tradition of Adolf Bastian, Frazer suggested the regicidal rite at Nemi was a salient example of the broader “primitive” association of death with resurrection and fertility.

Frazer’s ahistorical comparative method, paired with his acceptance of social evolutionism, accommodated his British colonial presuppositions. He used these analytical tools to classify, interpret, and malign the “primitives” in peasant Europe and in the British colonies. Drawing inspiration from Auguste Comte, E. B. Tylor, and William Robertson Smith, among others, Frazer postulated a uniform progression of human intellectual development from “magic” to “religion” to “science.” In Frazer’s estimation, both “magic” and “science” presumed that impersonal and unconscious forces governed the universe. Yet “magic” was a pseudoscience since it tried to manipulate

those forces based on associative fallacies. Frazer maintained that “religion” was inferior to “science” because it operated on the faulty assumption that conscious and personal forces controlled the universe. Thus, for Frazer, European elites stood at the acme of human social development because they had embraced “science.” By contrast, “primitives” organized their lives around the less developed principles of “magic” and “religion” and, hence, were culturally inferior.

Comparison and social evolution also facilitated Frazer’s veiled criticism of his childhood faith, Christianity. Although Jesus is not explicitly mentioned alongside the death and resurrection narratives discussed in *GB*, most scholars have appropriately intuited here an implicit criticism of Christianity as a vestige of the “primitive mind.” Despite the fierce criticism of his work during his life and posthumously, Frazer influenced notable figures in anthropology (Bronislaw Malinowski), psychology (Sigmund Freud), and literary criticism (T. S. Eliot).

Bibliography:

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Further Reading:

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