

The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith, by Timothy Larsen. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014. 227 pp. + 17 pp. works cited + 8 pp. index. ISBN 978-0-19-965787-2. Hardcover, US\$45.00.

The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith is the title of a recent thoroughly-researched scholarly book on the oft-turbulent relationship between the discipline of anthropology and Christianity. A better subtitle perhaps should have been "British anthropologists all connected to Oxford in some way, some of whom converted to Catholicism and some who did not." Admittedly, that is a more ungainly subtitle than the one currently appended to the title, but it would perhaps be more accurate. For despite author Timothy Larsen's painstakingly detailed research into his subject, it is glaring in its conspicuous lack of Protestant perspectives of any kind. Ironic, too, is the exclusive focus on British anthropologists; are there no American or Kenyan or Brazilian anthropologists who have compelling personal narratives about the Christian faith? And why the consistent thread of affiliation with Oxford University in some way running through each narrative? One strongly suspects that the answer to this latter question is that some of the research for this volume was conducted while Larsen was a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford.

Despite these immediately apparent limitations, the overall volume remains an important work in the anthropology of religion, for it exposes the discipline's bias against Christianity (even while it celebrates "exotic" religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism). For Christian anthropologists such as myself, a long-running perplexity has been this double-standard within the discipline. Why is New Age or animistic religion "cool" whereas a self-identified Christian is viewed as a "bigot"? This tacit disapproval of Christianity rarely flares out into the open where it can be called out, identified, and exposed for the inconsistency that it is. But it is a real undercurrent experienced and described by my colleagues at other institutions through our worldwide Network of Christian Anthropologists (NCA). *The Slain God* calls out this bias, identifies it, and deftly exposes it through the presentation of five case studies of prominent anthropologists who either left the faith as they embraced their profession or found faith through their profession despite the odds. The first two cases examined in the book were characterized by the former; the final three by the latter. What follows is a brief summary of each case, chapter by chapter (mirroring the way that the book itself is laid out), followed by some concluding remarks bringing the entire oeuvre together.

Chapter 1 begins with the so-called "father of anthropology," Edward Burnett Tylor. He was so called because he is the first recorded person in

history to have held an academic post exclusively as an anthropologist. Other scholars before him, whose specialties were in other related disciplines, had dabbled in anthropology through their academic appointments in other departments. But Tylor was the first bona fide professor of anthropology.

Tylor was raised a Quaker, and he did not abandon those roots prior to becoming an anthropologist; his loss of faith happened gradually over time. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of Tylor's objections to religion were tinged with his Quaker past. He seemed to be trying to exorcise the Quakerism out of himself even while selectivity clinging to those Quaker objections to other religious traditions (idol worship, ritualism) that suited him. His thought was thus not an equal opportunity rejection of all religions from an objective standpoint, but rather a biased and unduly harsh criticism of whichever forms of religion he personally most felt need of dethroning.

For Tylor, religion started with dreams. He posited that savage minds are unable to differentiate the material from the imagined, and thus savages develop the notion of a soul that is separate from the body because their minds take them elsewhere while their bodies are sleeping. Over time, this belief in a soul graduates to spirits, then a ranking of spirits, and finally a supreme spirit. Tylor thus described religion as primitive attempts at philosophy by savage minds, thus setting up a false dichotomy between religion and science. He presented the two as inherently incompatible, the one limiting progressive thinking and the other discrediting backward thinking.

Perhaps Tylor's most famous contribution to early anthropological thought was the notion of cultural evolution. Evolutionism (as it is sometimes also called) is very distinct from biological evolution. Whereas Darwinian evolution proposes that certain species arose from others through mutation and natural selection, cultural evolution claims that even within a single species—*Homo sapiens*—there are more and less advanced representatives of the race. Specifically, Tylor proposed a classification system wherein all human cultures could be identified as either savage (the lowest level of cultural evolution), barbaric (a medium level of development), or civilized (which—what a coincidence!—just so happened to be where Europeans are to be found. A human phenomenon is that people tend to view their own culture as the apex of humanity, and I suppose it should come as no surprise that unwary European anthropologists are also susceptible to slipping into this mode of thinking). In Tylor's view, those peoples on the lower rungs of cultural evolution were aspiring to (and slowly but surely attaining) civilization; it was only a matter of time before everyone around the world would be

civilized. But in achieving this status, all must follow the natural progression; no leaping from savage to civilized allowed!

Tylor's classification system allowed for holdovers (which he termed "survivals"). People who for the most part might have progressed to the next level of development might still retain vestiges of practices or belief systems that served them well at a more primitive level, but which are maladaptive and have no place at a higher level. For Tylor, religion was one of those "survivals" which should have been shed along the way toward achieving civilization.

Today, cultural evolution is frowned upon and widely rejected by most anthropologists—even those who are firm believers in Darwinian biological evolution. The concept of cultural ecology has demonstrated that cultural practices and behaviors are rooted in the environmental circumstances in which people find themselves, and that adaptations to these diverse surroundings can account for much of the cultural variation that is seen today. According to the popular contemporary concept of cultural relativism, there is no ranking of "better" or "worse" cultural practices by an objective standard; one can only determine if a behavior or belief is more or less adaptive to its own particular surroundings. Thus, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. But (strangely enough) in so doing, the rejection of cultural evolution has not led to a concurrent rejection of Tylor's anti-religious stance.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to James Frazer, one of Tylor's contemporaries who was inspired to join the new discipline of anthropology through his reading of Tylor's works. Like Tylor, Frazer had also been raised a Christian; like Tylor, Frazer had also gradually rejected the faith of his fathers. Yet Frazer seemed more concerned than Tylor about the potential social ramifications of leaving the faith. Thus, he comes across as a slippery guy, publicly praising missionaries who provided source material for his work in line with his presuppositions and yet excoriating Christianity in his writing. On the one hand, he would write works that controversially challenged pillars of the Christian faith—and would admit privately to friends that he was intentionally doing so—but on the other hand, he would feign surprise and hurt when his work inevitably stirred public controversy and offense. On the one hand, he would not inform his dearest Christian family and friends about his most damning anti-Christian works (and in the days before instant and widespread media, it was more possible to have selective control over the information one wanted to share), but on the other hand, he repeatedly took his attacks on Christianity up a notch when those dear Christian friends died. It seems he was an image groomer par excellence far in advance of the days of Instagram and Facebook, and the public image that he carefully cultivated was one of an innocent seeker for truth, pained by

the offense that his works generated, while his private letters to like-minded friends reveal that he knew exactly what he was doing all along.

Frazer's major contribution of note for the purposes of this book was to take Tylor's three-part classification and develop a corresponding triad of his own: Tylor's savage stage corresponded with Frazer's magical; Tylor's barbaric stage corresponded with Frazer's religious; and Tylor's civilized stage corresponded with Frazer's scientific. As Larsen put it:

The new theoretical scheme was a three-stage human progression: magic, religion, and science. Magic is based on the assumption that particular actions inevitably produce certain results. These causal assumptions, however, are invalid. When magic is discerned to be erroneous, people turn to religion. This is marked by entreating spiritual beings and therefore accommodates the unpredictability of outcomes: prayers are offered, but one cannot know for sure whether or not the god will grant the request. (p. 41)

Larsen continues, "In this stadiad triad, religion is the odd one out. Religion is wrong in both theory and practice, while magic is right in theory but merely wrong in practice." (p. 42)

Frazer tried too hard to force savage belief systems and practices into Judeo-Christian categories in order to make his point that one derived from the other, or is simply a more complex version of the other. Yet in so doing, he frequently ignored any deep or serious analysis of the Jewish or Christian traditions that themselves gave rise to the categories in the first place! And his penchant for transposing ideas and categories from one religious tradition to another was undeterred even when it flew in the face of what his ethnographic informants themselves were telling him. For Frazer, the greater goal was identifying the broadest of similarities, not highlighting the substantial ways in which various religious traditions differ, even though those differences could be key junctures at which the traditions under comparison diverge irreconcilably.

To gain insight into how far Frazer's sojourn into the land of religious skepticism had taken him, it is helpful to quote a passage of Larsen's book at length:

Fundamental to Frazer's work is the conviction that the reason why some of the foundational timbers of culture are rotten is because they are soaked in blood ... he viewed religion as inherently drawn to violence ... typified by a universal impulse in the religious frame of mind toward human sacrifice.... Frazer argues that the Jewish Passover was really a ritual of human sacrifice.... As for Christianity, Frazer speculates Christmas was once a festival in which a man was sacrificed 'in the character of the Yule Boar.'... Seemingly every celebration of the coming of spring, however cheerful and bright it may appear now, every harvest festival, however simple and culinary, every festive

fire—whatever it is—finds its origins in some earlier compulsion to slaughter one’s own children and one’s neighbours. After reading Frazer, one can hardly eat a gingerbread man without wondering who the poor bloke was whose blood was shed before this mitigated form was devised. (p. 72)

When reading about both Tylor and Frazer, certain similarities jump out. For one thing, both not only left their religious upbringings behind, but became foremost critics of the hand that had fed them in childhood. Theirs was not a quiet parting of ways with religion but a vocal and almost vitriolic breakup. This animosity leads one to question their objectivity and ability to give fair treatment to their hated “ex.” But perhaps the most salient similarity between Tylor and Frazer is the fact that both were what is now derogatorily referred to as “armchair anthropologists”—those who never travel to the field and yet style themselves experts on other people’s ways of life. This was not uncommon for the early days of anthropology, as travel was difficult and voyagers of other stripes (merchants, explorers, etc.) brought back enough fanciful reports to keep cultural analysts busy for a good long while. But the reliability of such reports is questionable, being written by untrained adventurers and not always for the purpose of scholarly accuracy and rigor. Nevertheless, Tylor and Frazer entirely built their insights upon these secondhand reports, rather than collecting data for themselves and seeing if their theories stood up to scrutiny. As it turns out, they did not. In subsequent years as anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski insisted upon fieldwork as the primary source for anthropologists’ data, Tylor and Frazer’s theories withered into the annals of embarrassing anthropological history.

It is easy to see the inconsistencies in others but to be blind to them in oneself. One wonders how much of the low-hanging fruit these early anthropologists present to critique might have been plucked off before ripening too far if more rigorous peer review were available at the time. To be fair, the discipline was still quite small at the turn of the nineteenth century when Tylor and Frazer were active, and there were not that many peers available. So perhaps a wider course of action would be to check the impulse to scoff too loudly, cognizant of the fact that anyone might make similarly obvious blunders of logic or reasoning were it not for the robust network of peers available today. Still, one marvels at how easy it is to point out the fatal flaws of thinking that marked so many of the early anthropologist’s conclusions presented in this book.

Chapter 3 enters the subject from a different kind of narrative: that of anthropologists who either kept their faith despite long-term exposure to the discipline’s anti-Christian bias or who converted to Christianity while working as well-respected and world-renowned anthropologists. Edward

Evan Evans-Pritchard was *the* greatest anthropologist of his time, a point readily conceded even by his opponents. He was the son of a minister who seems to have left his Christian upbringing behind for a time. Evans-Pritchard was the first professional anthropologist to conduct extensive fieldwork, setting him (and others from his generation) apart from anthropology's earliest scholars. He began his professional academic career in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Whatever his wanderings from his childhood faith were, Evans-Pritchard became a Catholic during fieldwork. This decision completely baffled his colleagues. That such an obviously brilliant thinker could commit such a slip of logic was beyond their comprehension. And so their response was to try in every way to deny the authenticity of his conversion. Even before he converted to Catholicism, Evans-Pritchard appeared to have a soft spot for missionaries. He befriended them in the field, solicited their commentary on his work, and credited them in the front matter of his scholarly works. This perhaps portended his imminent conversion, but whatever the cues, his colleagues had missed them entirely.

One of Evans-Pritchard's greatest works was the book *Nuer Religion*, which is a classic in anthropology to this day. In it, Evans-Pritchard's religious orientation allowed him to make analogies and draw parallels with Christianity that nonbelievers might have missed, and in so doing, demonstrate that Nuer religion was at the very least no less complex and developed than that of civilized man. This is the positive side of research on religious experience being conducted by those who are themselves religious. One often hears only the negative: the concern that one's personal religious orientation will result in a biased view of those being researched. And to be fair, Evans-Pritchard displayed this negative aspect in equal measure. In his eagerness to draw parallels between Nuer religion and Christianity, he seems to have given in periodically to the propensity to stuff Nuer religious categories and practices into Judeo-Christian boxes where they might have been better suited to creating boxes of their own. Still, on balance, it seems that his religious "bias" may have helped his research. Larsen puts it thusly:

Imagine how different Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* would have been if he had proceeded on the assumption that cattle are purely imaginary creatures and then attempted to find some way—however far-fetched—to explain why they were nonetheless so central to the thinking and actions of this Nilotic people. This is what it is like to read Tylor, Frazer, and company on primitive religion: 'After all, it does make a difference whether one thinks that a cow exists or is an illusion!' (p. 99)

Chapter 4 introduces Mary Douglas who, like Evans-Pritchard, was considered to be one of the greatest and most preeminent anthropologists of her time. She was also, like Evans-Pritchard, a Catholic. Douglas was inspired by Evans-Pritchard—inspired by a pragmatic example of how one can be a faithful Christian *and* a rigorous, well-respected anthropologist. She ultimately came to embody both of those values herself. As Larsen notes,

Once again ... hers was the opposite of the expected, modern narrative—a non-story in its terms: not one of a loss of faith leading to a new kind of life but rather a period of crisis leading to a maturing and deepening of religious convictions—to continuity not discontinuity. (p. 126)

Douglas's anthropology was characterized by two distinctive features: her preoccupation with hierarchy and her uncanny ability to challenge expectations. Douglas personally found comfort in hierarchy, and whether that was an innate personality trait of hers or not, her affinity for hierarchy was certainly influenced by her mostly positive experience in the highly structured world of the Catholic boarding school in which she was raised. In many of her writings, her wish that others would share her esteem for hierarchy shines through. Douglas readily and gladly submitted herself to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and she worked vigorously to defend that system. For example, she argued that condensed religious symbols (such as Friday meat abstinence), although onerous to some, should not be swept aside as some Reformers advocated. To do so would be to denigrate the value of symbols in general, leading to contempt of the greatest symbol of all: the sacrament.

In this, Douglas appeared to be very much the religious conservative (a label she rejected for herself). But this is perhaps where her ability to challenge expectations shone through the most. For she enjoyed defying expectations of a champion of tradition such as herself. For example, "Elsewhere she would argue that assuming that a faith which has lots of regulations regarding sex has a negative attitude toward it is like inferring that the high standards of gourmets reveal them to have a condemning rather than celebratory attitude toward food" (p. 144). Sex positivity: not a trait typically associated with religious conservatives. And she reveled in this type of expectation defiance.

Douglas delighted in pointing out that there is nothing new under the sun, that history is cyclical. What the stadialists such as Tylor and Frazer believed was evidence of progression from primitive religion to modern science was, to Douglas, merely evidence that humans repeat themselves. To underscore her assertion that doubt and scientific skepticism are not the exclusive purview of modernity, she frequently pointed to examples in the ethnographic record of supposedly primitive peoples also taking a

lukewarm stance toward the supernatural or rejecting religious ritualism. Her unspoken hope, it would seem, is that readers would make the connection that she explicitly did not: if savages can have skeptical secularism just as much as some moderns do, then moderns can have religious faith just as much as some savages do. The categories are not inimical to each other. And in so conceding, moderns will be forced to reject simplistic Frazerian linearity when contemplating the trajectories of religion and science. In all, y Douglas was a brilliant anthropologist and a staunch Christian that used her sharp mind and quick wit to expose inconsistencies in the anti-Christian biases of others even while demonstrating with her life that a fervent Christian need not be a prude.

Chapter 5 brings us to Victor and Edith Turner. Both Turners were raised by Protestant parents, but both rejected religion in their teens and young adulthood. Their early marriage was described as “bohemian”: they married in a secular ceremony (to the chagrin of their parents), lived in a gypsy caravan, and became card-carrying members of the Communist Party. This latter fact partly contributed to their move to the University of Manchester for Victor’s doctoral studies (and subsequent faculty appointment), as there were a number of communist sympathizers in the department there.

While at Manchester, the Turner family converted to Catholicism as a result of their fieldwork among the ritualistic Ndembu of Northern Rhodesia. Victor and Edith were separately impressed with the depth of meaning of Ndembu religious ritual, and this prompted a curiosity in investigating Christian ritual upon their return to England. Ultimately, the ritualism of the Catholic Church made the deepest impression upon them, and they embraced their newfound religion as wholeheartedly as they had embraced secular communism in their youth, much to the consternation of their colleagues in the Manchester School. Their devoutness was perhaps most visibly demonstrated by their willing acquiescence to the church’s disapproving teaching on birth control, which led to the birth of three more children (in addition to the three they already had) in short order (though one, a daughter with Down’s Syndrome, died shortly after birth). Although they were not formally kicked out of the department at Manchester, the Turners sought to leave as a result of the hostility expressed toward their “betrayal” of the ideals that the school stood for. It was at this point that the family moved to the United States for Victor’s initial appointment at Cornell, then Chicago, and finally Virginia.

Although this chapter is about both of the Turners, actually only Victor held an earned doctorate in anthropology, and only Victor held formal academic positions in anthropology during his lifetime. However, the Turners were close collaborators throughout their career together, co-

authoring several works together and contributing to each other's solitary works with personal insights. Victor may have held the trappings of officialdom for career anthropologists, but both he and Edith saw themselves as equals in this regard. After Victor's untimely death at the age of 63, Edith rose to great prominence within the discipline in her own right, as it became apparent that her own anthropological prowess was not entirely dependent upon her late husband's intellectual contribution. She went on to earn a Master's degree in English from the University of Virginia and was awarded multiple honorary doctorates in anthropology from various institutions.

Since Victor's death, Edith has become a radical and open-minded believer in observer participation, a play on the term "participant-observation" which implies a sincerity in participating, not simply doing so for the sake of better data collection. This has led her to believe her informants, not just record their beliefs. Thus, she sincerely believes informants when they say that they have seen a spirit, for example. She takes the spirit to be a real, literal thing. She herself has taken such an interest in spiritual healing that she has taken part in a shamanic role, has been miraculously healed herself, and continues to host a weekly gathering in her home to this day wherein diverse spiritual healing practices are discussed and demonstrated. She is comfortable, nay eager, to explore the mystical fringes of Catholicism, and yet repeatedly and resolutely affirms that she is a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic.

The Slain God thus took a series of mini-biographies and attempted to illustrate principles regarding anthropology's relationship with Christianity through focused narratives. One criticism that I heard levied against this book in online discussions with other members of the NCA is that it was light on contemporary anthropologists. In fact, of all those discussed in this book, only Edith Turner is still alive (92 years of age at the time of the book's writing). The NCA is certainly not the sole repository of Christian anthropologists anywhere in the world, but it is undoubtedly the largest and most robust. Yet not a single member of the NCA—past or present—was profiled in *The Slain God*. One could argue that it is because none of us are prestigious enough. But we are certainly a diverse lot, incorporating currently active missionaries with anthropological background and training, academic anthropologists at universities both public and private throughout the world, researchers, government employees, and humanitarian workers. The list is endless, and the perspectives and experiences of this diverse group are very much a part of the history of anthropology and Christianity as the experiences of prestigious British anthropologists all connected to Oxford in some way, some of whom converted to Catholicism and some who did not.

Where were the experiences and perspectives of at least one or two other categories of Christian anthropologists?

Another area that left me wanting more upon finishing reading this book was a discussion of how anthropological attitudes toward Christianity have shifted over time. My experience as a graduate student in the early 2000s was not as fraught with tension between my faith and my scholarship as I was led to expect it to be. And I have heard similar accounts from my peers from that same era. Shifting cultural perceptions mean that the relationship between anthropology and Christianity is dynamic and not fixed, yet that was not discussed or emphasized in *The Slain God*.

With these criticisms aside, *The Slain God* did do a fine job of what the author intended it to do. It did not deliver on its broadly-defined promise in the title and subtitle, but that which it narrowly focused upon was rigorous and well-informed. If you approach this work with these caveats firmly in place and with the expectation not of a philosophical treatise but of a series of biographical accounts of specific cases of anthropology's awkward relationship with Christianity, then you could do no better than to pick this book up and read it. Perhaps the best way to end this review is by quoting a devout Jewish anthropologist who was a colleague of Evans-Pritchard at Oxford. In response to those who doubted the ability of religious anthropologists to be objective, fair, and unbiased, "Steiner defiantly argued that it was those anthropologists who lacked religious experience who were most likely to be unreliable: 'one is inclined to make reservations of the kind one would make when asked to read a treatise on sexual psychology composed by a eunuch'" (p. 113, footnote 163).

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The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement, by Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015. 346 pp. ISBN 978-1-4336-7375-7. Hardcover, US\$49.99.

The Baptist Story is the latest church history textbook of the world-wide Baptists, primarily written for students as indicated by the authors. It is a culmination of nearly six years work by three distinguished Baptist religious historians—Anthony L. Chute of California Baptist University, Na-