

importance of the book was as much literary as scholarly, in that it showed that the controversial subject of the history of religion could be made accessible in a nonpolemical way to a general audience by a writer whose style was marked by elegance, visual vividness, irony, and self assurance. Indeed, inasmuch as modern anthropologists now widely discredit the scientific methods used by Frazer and most of his contemporaries, the lasting value of the book is literary. (Frazer was not dogmatic. He recognized that his own theories and speculations were all provisional, likely to be replaced by better ones, and hoped that his works might endure as storehouses of data.)

The book's impact on literature has been profound with such writers as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Ezra Pound all drawing inspiration from it. Frazer was instrumental in bringing the issues raised by anthropology into the world's view.

The Book's "Plot"

The book's ostensible purpose is to explain the origins of the priesthood at Nemi as Frazer mentions in a letter to his publisher in 1886:

"By an application of the comparative method I believe I can make probable that the priest represented in his person the god of the grove - Virbius - and that his slaughter was regarded as the death of the god. This raises the question of a wide spread custom of killing men and animals regarded as divine... The Golden Bough, I believe I can show, was the mistletoe, and the whole legend can I think, be brought into connexion, on the one hand, with the Druidical reverence for the mistletoe and the human sacrifices accompanying their worship, and, on the other hand, with the Norse legend of the death of Balder... [W]hatever may be thought of [the book's] theories it will be found, I believe, to contain a large store of very curious customs, many of which may be new to professed anthropologists. The resemblance of many of the savage customs and ideas to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity is striking. But I make no reference to this parallelism, leaving my readers to draw their own conclusions, one way or the other."

Frazer's Main Thesis

For Frazer, human consciousness is the product of lengthy evolution. Primitive mentality represents one point low down on the development line; modern consciousness another point higher on the same line.

Magic → Religion → Science → ? (the future)

Frazer's draws his insight from Darwin, whose book The Origin

of Species (1859) engendered religious skepticism and shaped the whole intellectual climate of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The pressing question of the day, not just for Frazer but for nearly all intellectuals, was the origin of religion and morality. Frazer was a rationalist and sought to discredit modern religion by showing that its beliefs and practices were deeply rooted in superstition and error: e.g. human sacrifice, primitive magic, and mistaken notions of cause and effect. Frazer does not look at religion in the larger social context or as a means of meeting human emotional needs (as does his contemporary William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience). Instead, he sees belief as an intellectual problem of the individual mind: the primitive mind is motivated by fear of surroundings, and religion is a response to this fear.

Sources

These notes draw freely from the following:

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The Golden Bough, 1 volume abridged edition, Sir James G. Frazer, Macmillan, 1922.