

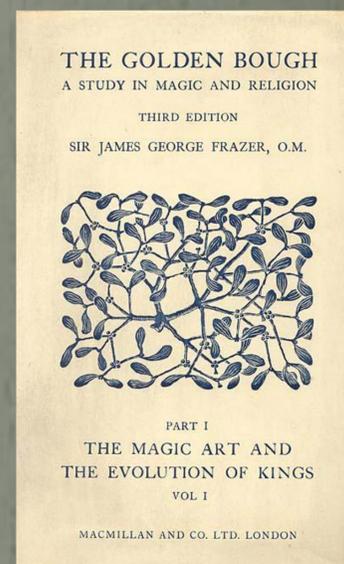
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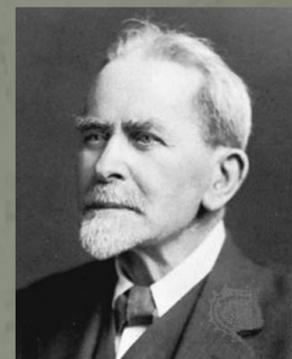
“Explaining Religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries:  
Evolution, Anthropology, and the History of Religions”

My current book-length research project -- *Sexual Heresies: Religion, Science and Sexuality in Modern Britain* – opens with a chapter on late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts to explain religion in the light of the new theories of human evolution introduced in Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).

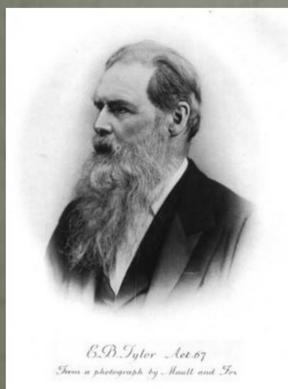
James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, for example, first published in 1890 and expanded and revised over the next three decades, laid out an evolutionary schema in which cultures moved from an “Age of Magic” through an “Age of Religion” which was in turn being displaced by a new age of science. While Frazer’s work is often understood within the framework of secularization, taking own project as evidence of the process he described, Frazer’s account was actually pessimistic in tone and profoundly aware of the limitations of science and rationality, and his work complicated and undermined even as it reified the divisions between primitive and modern or religious and secular.



My emphasis in my own research project is on the ways in which scientists in a diverse range of academic disciplines – from Sir James Frazer in anthropology to Havelock Ellis in sexology – began to characterize religious experiences as derived from or a displacement of the sexual impulse. In the context of the CERC project, my contribution is to revisit that material and to explore it as a precursor to our own efforts to understand and explain the origins of religious belief and practice, paying particular attention to the ways in which our own project not only revisits and revises that earlier effort, but is also shaped by it in important ways.



J. G. Frazer (1854-1941)



“The theory of the soul is one principal part of a system of religious philosophy, which unites, in an unbroken line of mental connexion, the savage fetish-worshipper and the civilized Christian.”

E. B. Tylor (1832-1917)



Andrew Lang (1844-1912)

Andrew Lang, “Double Ballade of Primitive Man” (1881)

He worshipp'd the rain and the breeze,  
He worshipp'd the river that flows  
And the Dawn, and the Moon, and the trees,  
And bogies, and serpents, and crows;  
He buried his dead with their toes  
Tucked-up, an original plan,  
Till their knees came right under their nose,--  
‘Twas the manner of Primitive Man.