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Insofar as William Robertson Smith is a figure recognised by students of nineteenth century culture, he is known mostly for two things. First is his expulsion from the Professorship of Oriental Languages in the Free Church College at Aberdeen after several years of accusations of heresy instigated by an article on the Bible which he wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and which argued that the Pentateuch was not the composition of a single author. This is regularly cited as the last great heresy trial in Scotland, symptomatic of the nation’s refusal to acknowledge the outcomes of the modern biblical scholarship that was widely accepted on the Continent. The second is Edward Said’s identification of Smith—in his study of *Orientalism* (1978), one of the most influential books of postcolonial criticism—as the source of the discipline which claimed to be able to understand the East from the more advanced and higher cultural perspective of the West: ‘Smith, I think, was a crucial link in the intellectual chain connecting the White-Man-as-expert to the modern Orient’. In the first perspective, Robertson Smith is the hero of modernity, fighting the entrenched ignorance of a backward people who cling to ancient superstition. In the second, he is the villain of a Western refusal to engage with colonised peoples, determined to prove the inferiority of all who are not part of his Western, Christian culture: Said finds in Robertson Smith’s writings ‘a coercive framework, by which a modern “coloured” man is chained irrevocably to the general truths formulated about his prototypical linguistic, anthropological, and doctrinal forebears by a white European scholar’. It is from this perspective, established by Robertson Smith’s writings, that ‘the work of the great twentieth-century Oriental experts in England and France derived’.

To these two perspectives, however, more specialised knowledge could add two further views. First, that he developed an evolutionary account of the development of religion that attempted to do for humanity’s spiritual development what Darwin and Huxley had done for its biological development, and that his account was as challenging as theirs in its radical overturning of the

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2 Ibid., 237.
securities of a world of stable truths. Second, that his comparative study of the cultures recorded in the Old Testament with those of other cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, was the beginning of the modern discipline of social anthropology, which was to be profoundly shaped, through the work of his great follower, Sir J. G. Frazer (who dedicated his great work, *The Golden Bough*, to Smith), by key concepts, such as totem and taboo, which Robertson Smith had brought into regular use. If one were to trace his influence on European thought, then major figures such as Durkheim and Freud would be among those whose thinking was decisively changed by their encounter with his work.

Add to this that he was the editor of one the great editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Ninth (1875–88), which was the first to attempt to incorporate the theory of evolution into all of its materials, and one is left with the sense of a man who was not only a polymath but was at the beginning of many things—whether good or bad—that continue to be important in the modern world.

Robertson Smith was born in Aberdeenshire, educated in Aberdeen, challenged in Aberdeen and buried in Aberdeenshire. It was therefore appropriate that in its first year of its operation, the Centre for Scottish Thought at the University of Aberdeen should organise a symposium on Robertson Smith’s work, and it is that symposium, held on 6 December 2007, from which the articles in this volume of the journal derive. It was a privilege to have in our audience Professor William Johnstone, who had organised the William Robertson Smith congress in 1994, on the centenary of Smith’s death, and which produced the major publication on Smith in recent times—*William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (Sheffield, 1995). It was also a special pleasure that Astrid Hess was able to be in our audience, who is the great-granddaughter of Robertson Smith’s sister, a sister who found a husband in Germany while on a tour with Smith in 1876, and whose account of life in the Smith family home, *Children of the Manse*, was translated by Astrid Hess and Gordon Booth and published in 2004.

The Smith that appears in his sister’s account is also the Smith that appears in James Bryce’s brief biography: ‘Because he knew so much, he was interested in everything, and threw himself with a joyous freshness and keenness into talk alike upon the most serious and the lightest topics. He was combative, apt to traverse a proposition when first advanced, even though he might come round to it afterwards; and a discussion with him taxed the defensive acumen of his companions. . . . Yet this tendency, while it made his society more stimulating,
did not make it less agreeable, because he never seemed to seek to overthrow an adversary, but only to get at the truth of the case, and his manner, though positive, had it about it nothing either acrid or conceited. One could imagine no keener intellectual pleasure than his company afforded, for there was, along with an exuberant wealth of thought and knowledge, an intensity and ardour which lit up every subject which it touched.\(^3\) What is striking is of just how many subjects Robertson Smith had an ‘exuberant wealth of knowledge’, and how that exuberance led him far beyond the boundaries of the knowledge that would be expected of a Free Church minister. Despite the fact that he remained committed till the end of his life to the Free Church, and indeed never ceased to be a minister in it, a biography published shortly after his death noted that he was ‘an ardent student of Arabic literature [who] devoted more time to it than to Hebrew’,\(^4\) and the striking photograph of him taken in arab dress (which appears on our cover) is subtitled with the nom de voyage given him by his travelling companions—Abdullah Effendi.

We hope that this volume will bring into focus a few of those subjects of which Robertson Smith had such a wealth of knowledge, and continue the effort to come to terms with the international significance and the Scottish impact of one of the most brilliant of Scotland’s nineteenth-century intellectuals.

\(^3\) Ibid., 323–4.

There are three contenders for the status of first sociologist of religion: Fustel de Coulanges, Émile Durkheim, and William Robertson Smith. Chronologically, there is no contest: *The Ancient City*, Fustel’s main and in fact only work on the sociology of religion, was published in 1864. Smith’s principal work on the subject, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, was published only in 1889. His sole other work bearing on the sociology of religion, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, was published only four years earlier. Durkheim’s writings on religion date from 1899, but his central tome, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, did not appear until 1912.

Moreover, Fustel was Durkheim’s teacher and deeply influenced him. Smith also deeply influenced Durkheim. By contrast, it is unclear whether Smith was

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4 On Smith’s influence on Durkheim, see my ‘Smith’s Influence on Durkheim’s Theory of Myth and Ritual’, in Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson (eds), *Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today* (Leiden, 2002), 59–72. That Smith was a key influence on Durkheim’s theory of religion as a whole is not in dispute. In two letters published in 1907 in the Catholic journal *La Revue néo-scholastique*, Durkheim denied the charge, made by Simon Deploige in a series of articles in the journal, that he had taken his ideas from the German Wilhelm Wundt. On the contrary, replied Durkheim in the second letter, the real source of his ideas was English-speaking: ‘il est qui j’aurais chez Wundt l’idée que la religion est la matrice des idées morales, juridiques etc. C’est en 1887 que je lus Wundt: or c’est seulement en 1895 que j’eus le sentiment net du rôle capital joué par la religion dans la vie sociale. C’est en cette année que, pour la première fois, je trouvai le moyen d’aborder sociologiquement l’étude de la religion. Ce fut pour moi une révélation. Ce cours de 1895 marque une ligne de démarcation dans le développement de ma pensée si bien que toute mes recherches antérieures durent être reprises à nouveaux frais pour être mises en harmonie avec ces vues nouvelles. L’Ethik de Wundt, lue huit ans auparavant, n’était pour rien dans ce changement d’orientation. Il était du tout antérieurs études d’histoire trouvaient de Smith et de son école’ (Durkheim, ‘Lettres au
even aware of Fustel.\footnote{On the purported influence of Fustel on Smith, who himself never cites Fustel, see Steven Lukes, \textit{Émile Durkheim} (Harmondsworth, 1975), 238, 450 n. 1. Against Lukes’ claim of influence, see T. O. Beidelman, \textit{W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion} (Chicago, 1974), 68 n. 142.} Fustel did write before the emergence of sociology as a discipline and did see himself as a historian instead. Still, he was concerned with the same sociological issues as both Smith and Durkheim and on chronological grounds therefore merits the title of first sociologist of religion.

But if chronology is one criterion, influence is another. Smith is almost always accorded more influence than Fustel, to the point of being called the first sociologist of religion. Social scientists of the stature of Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Mary Douglas have so proclaimed him. Writes Malinowski: ‘Robertson Smith [was] the first modern anthropologist to establish the sociological point of view in the treatment of religion’. Smith’s ‘principle’ was ‘that religion is a belief carried out by an organized group of people, and it cannot be understood unless we treat a dogmatic system as a part of organized worship and of collective tradition’\footnote{Bronislaw Malinowski, \textit{A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays} (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944), 188, 189.}. Writes Radcliffe-Brown: ‘Important contributions to social anthropology were made by historians such as Fustel de Coulanges, Henry Maine and Robertson Smith. The last named writer is particularly important as the pioneer in the sociological study of religion in his work on early Semitic religion’.\footnote{A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, \textit{Method in Social Anthropology}, ed. M. N. Srinivas (Chicago, 1958), 161.} Writes Douglas: ‘Whereas [E. B.] Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore; Robertson Smith founded social anthropology’\footnote{Mary Douglas, \textit{Purity and Danger} (Harmondsworth, 1970 [1st ed. 1966]), 24–5.}.

I beg to differ with Douglas on Smith’s supposed interest in ‘the common elements in modern and primitive experience’. Smith stresses the differences, not the similarities, between modern and primitive experience, not least religious experience. The key difference for him is that where primitive religion is that of the group, modern religion is that of the individual. By contrast, religion per se for Durkheim is of the group. Because the subject of sociology is the group, Smith ‘sociologizes’ only half of religion. Therefore the title of

\textit{La Revue néo-scholastique}, 14 (20 October 1907), 613. See also Durkheim's review of Deploige’s \textit{Le Conflit de la morale et de la sociologie}, \textit{L’Année sociologique}, 17 (1913), 326–8.
first sociologist of religion, even if deserved by Smith vis-à-vis Fustel, is only half-deserved vis-à-vis Durkheim.

**Durkheim on religion**

For Durkheim, the origin, function, and content of religion are entirely social. Using primitive religion as the simplest and therefore for him the clearest instance of religion generally, Durkheim argues that religion originates socially because, to begin with, it originates in a group. Ordinarily, members of society—more precisely, of the totemic clan—live apart. Whenever they gather, their sheer contact with one another creates an extraordinary feeling of energy and power. They feel infused, uplifted, omnipotent: ‘The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are at once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation’.\(^9\) ‘In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces’.\(^10\)

Knowing that individually they lack this power, primitive peoples ascribe it not to themselves collectively but to possession by something external:

> One can readily conceive how, when arrived at this state of exaltation, a man does not recognize himself any longer. Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of an external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer.\(^11\)

Looking about, primitive peoples spot the totemic emblem, which they know is only a symbol of their totem yet which they nevertheless take as the object of worship. They even value it above the totem itself:

> All that he [the primitive] knows is that he is raised above himself and that he sees a different life from the one he ordinarily leads. However, he must connect these sensations to some external object as their cause. Now what does he see about him? On every side those things which

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\(^10\) Ibid., 240. See also 236–51, 463–5.

\(^11\) Ibid., 249.
appeal to his senses and strike his imagination are the numerous images [emblems] of the totem. . . . How could this image, repeated everywhere and in all sorts of forms, fail to stand out with exceptional relief in his mind? . . . The sentiments experienced fix themselves upon it, for it is the only concrete object upon which they can fix themselves.  

Because the supernatural power that primitive peoples attribute to the totemic emblem is in fact their own collective power, the true origin of religion is their experience of themselves: ‘So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born.’  

A logical problem which somehow eludes Durkheim is that totemism, for him the earliest stage of religion, must already exist prior to the gathering that supposedly creates it, for clan members gather to worship the totem. While most of the year clan members live apart ‘in little groups’ and so live virtually individually, sometimes ‘the population concentrates and gathers at determined points for a length of time varying from several days to a few months’, and ‘on this occasion they celebrate a religious ceremony, or else they hold what is called a corroborri’. Still, Durkheim intends to be attributing religion to the gathering—that is, to a group event. And that group event is a ritual.

The function, or effect, of the religious gathering is social: it is the instillment or, better, the intensification of a sense of dependence on society. Members of society are in fact beholden to it for everything: their morality, language, tools, values, thoughts, categories of thought, and concept of objectivity. As much as individuals benefit from these phenomena, Durkheim himself is concerned with only the social origin of the phenomena, not with their effect on individuals. Knowing that none of these phenomena, any more than their own effervescent state, is their individual creation, members ascribe them, too, to something external, on which they are therefore dependent. Everyday life confirms their dependence, but religion confirms it most intensely. For only during religious activity are members not just surrounded but possessed by something external. Here, too, Durkheim hardly denies the effect of religion on individuals. He even stresses the energy, confidence, and security that the

12 Ibid., 252. See also 252–4, 239.
13 Ibid., 250. See also 465.
14 Ibid., 246.
feeling of possession implants. Nevertheless, the consequence of that feeling for society itself concerns him more.

The external cause of possession is taken to be god, not society, but god is taken to be the god of society. Moreover, god is credited with not only possession but all the other social phenomena noted: language, tools, values, and so on. In depending on god for everything, members are in fact depending on society itself, which in its relationship to them is like god to worshipers:

In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend... Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence.\(^{17}\)

From dependence on god, and so on society, come loyalty and so unity—the ultimate effect of religion. The society that prays together stays together.

For Durkheim, religion is indispensable to maintaining the unity of society. So indispensable is it that Durkheim at times writes as if society, with a mind of its own, creates religion in order to foster unity: ‘There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality’.\(^{18}\)

Yet however much religion affects society, religion remains a social product. The origin of religion is not individual because there is no individual—more precisely, no innate one. In primitive society the link, or ‘solidarity’, among members is ‘mechanical’: occupationally alike, members have no distinctive identity and therefore no individuality. Their sole identity is as members of society. Only in modern society is there a division of labor and therefore the specialization that constitutes individuality. There remains solidarity—Durkheim never pits the individual against society—but it is now ‘organic’: members are related not just to society itself but, as specialized workers, to one another. They are like organs in an organism.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 236–7.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 474–5. See also 465–6.

For Durkheim, individuality both originates and functions socially. Its cause is the division of labor, and its operation requires formal recognition of the individual by society. There is no individuality in traditional religion, which deals entirely with the mechanical, pre-individualistic side of social life. In modern society that side, and so traditional religion, will continue to diminish as organic solidarity grows. Traditional religion will also continue to decline as science grows.  

On the one hand Durkheim predicts the eventual emergence of a new, secular religion to replace Christianity. That religion will perhaps be akin to the one created during the French Revolution:

In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born. . . . But this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last for ever [sic]. . . . We have already seen how the French Revolution established a whole cycle of holidays to keep the principles with which it was inspired in a state of perpetual youth. . . . But though the work may have miscarried, it enables us to imagine what might have happened in other conditions; and everything leads us to believe that it will be taken up again sooner or later.  

On the other hand Durkheim proposes the creation of a secular religion—a religion worshiping not god but humanity. He envisions a cult of the individual, but by the individual he means the nonegoistic individual, who reveres rather than violates the rights of others and thereby promotes rather than threatens the group. Coinciding with the harmonious individuality of organic solidarity, Durkheim’s new religion would thus serve the same social function as the old one: 

Now all that societies require in order to hold together is that their members fix their eyes on the same end and come together in a single faith; but it is not at all necessary that the object of this common faith be quite unconnected with individual persons. In short, individualism thus understood is the glorification not of the self, but of the individual

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20 See Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, 478.
21 Ibid., 475–6.
in general. Its motive force is not egoism but sympathy for all that is human. . . . Is this not the way to achieve a community of good will?23

Durkheim does grant the existence of individual worship: worship by less than all of society. But he labels it magic rather than religion and deems it parasitic on true, social religion—one of the many ideas that he takes from Smith.24

Durkheim gives a wholly sociological analysis of not only the origin and function but also the content of religion. God is imagined in exactly the fashion that society is experienced during group gatherings: as an extraordinary power on whom one is dependent. The number of gods reflects the number of sources of power in society. In primitive society there are many gods because clans are more powerful than the tribes of which they are parts. Not until a tribe becomes fully united does its god become singular.25

Smith on religion

Just as in The Elementary Forms Durkheim, in seeking the nature of religion per se, turns to Australian aborigines as the most primitive and therefore presumably clearest case, so in the Lectures Smith, in seeking the nature of Semitic religion, turns to ‘heathen Arabia’ as the earliest and therefore presumably clearest case: ‘In many respects the religion of heathen Arabia, though we have little information concerning it that is not of post-Christian date, displays an extremely primitive type, corresponding to the primitive and unchanging character of nomadic life’.26 Smith here evinces the fundamental assumption of his book: that the Semites were initially at a ‘primitive’ stage of culture and so must be compared with primitive peoples worldwide. Hence his employment of the comparative method.27 Smith initially hesitates to use the terms ‘primitive’ and ‘ancient’ (or ‘antique’) interchangeably only because Semitic culture in even its ancient stage advanced beyond its primitive beginnings, not

23 Ibid., 64. See also Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, 172–3, 407–9.
24 On magic, see Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, 57–63, especially 61 n. 62; Smith, Lectures, 55, 264.
26 Smith, Lectures, 14.
because Semitic religion at the outset was other than primitive. Once he has made this point, he does use the terms almost interchangeably.

Yet Smith’s aim is not only to show how primitive ancient Semitic religion originally was but also to show how far Christianity in particular advanced beyond its primitive roots. While his focus on the similarities between ancient Semitic religion and primitive religion is what was revolutionary and controversial, he was equally, if less controversially, focused on the subsequent differences between ancient Semitic and later Semitic religion. He first shows that Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, emerged out of Semitic religion generally, itself originally a case of primitive religion generally. But once he has traced Christianity backwards to its common primitive sources, he traces it forwards to its distinctiveness. So distinctive for him is Christianity that the explanation of its uniqueness can only be supernatural.

Because Smith takes Semitic religion as originally an instance of ancient religion generally and therefore as originally an instance of primitive religion generally, he starts with what makes primitive religion primitive. Where the heart of modern religion is belief, the heart of primitive religion is ritual. For Smith, that difference has often been missed by modern scholars, ingrained as moderns are ‘to look at religion from the side of belief rather than of practice’. Thus ‘we naturally assume that’ in primitive no less than in modern religion ‘our first business is to search for a creed, and find in it the key to ritual and practice’. In actuality, primitive religion ‘had for the most part no creed’ and ‘consisted entirely of institutions and practices’. While acknowledging that ‘men will not habitually follow certain practices without attaching a meaning to them’, in ancient religion we ordinarily find that ‘while the practice was rigorously fixed, the meaning attached to it was extremely vague, and the same rite was explained by different people in different ways, without any question of orthodoxy or heterodoxy arising in consequence’. ‘It was imperative that certain things should be done, but every man was free to put his own meaning on what was done’. Smith goes as far as to declare that ‘ritual and practical usage were, strictly speaking, the sum-total of ancient religions’. Smith’s focus on practice rather than belief as the core of primitive and ancient religion was revolutionary. For example, E. B. Tylor, one of the

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29 Ibid., 16.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 399.
32 Ibid., 20.
founders of social anthropology, devotes seven out of the eighteen chapters of his *Primitive Culture* (1871) to religious belief but only one chapter to religious ritual, which, moreover, he sees as the mere application of belief. By contrast, Smith devotes six of the eleven lectures in the First Series of his *Lectures* to rituals—specifically, to the key ritual of sacrifice—and devotes most of the other five lectures not to beliefs but to such topics as holy places. Smith might as well have been directing himself against Tylor in stating that ‘religion in primitive times was not a system of belief with practical applications’ but instead ‘a body of fixed traditional practices’.

Yet on ritual, as on other aspects of religion, Smith’s revolution stops short, and abruptly so. He does not propose that modern religion as well be looked at as ritual foremost. He approaches modern religion no differently from others of his time. It is creedal first and ritualistic second—no doubt a reflection of Smith’s anti-ritualistic, anit-Catholic viewpoint. For him, Protestantism is modern and Catholicism is an atavistic throwback to primitive religion.

Where twentieth-century theorists of religion have tended to stress the similarities between primitive and modern religion, Smith stresses the differences. Where twentieth-century theorists of religion have tended to make ritual the heart of all religion, Smith almost limits ritual to primitive religion. Because ritual for him is a collective activity, his downplaying of ritual in modern religion means the downplaying of the group in modern religion.

To drive home the point that in primitive and ancient religion ritual precedes belief, Smith compares religion with politics, noting that ‘political institutions are older than political theories’ and that ‘in like manner religious institutions are older than religious theories’. But Smith then asserts that in ancient times religion and politics were more than analogous. They were ‘parts of one whole of social custom’. Religion was ‘a part of the organised social life into which a man was born, and to which he conformed through life in the same unconscious way in which men fall into any habitual practice of the society in which they live’. Religious duty was civic duty, so that

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35 Even though Douglas celebrates Smith’s pioneering transformation of the study of religion from a concentration on individual belief to a concentration on group ritual, she regards his association of group ritual with primitive religion as part of the Protestant, anti-Catholic bias in the modern study of religion: see Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 29–30; *Natural Symbols*, rev. ed. (New York, 1973 [1st ed. 1970]), 28; and *In the Active Voice* (London and Boston, 1982), 35.
‘religious nonconformity was an offence against the state’. Nonconformity meant nonconformity in practice, not belief, so that ‘so long as the prescribed forms were duly observed, a man was recognised as truly pious, and no one asked how his religion was rooted in his heart or affected his reason’. Just like political duty, of which Smith now declares religion a part, religious duty ‘was entirely comprehended in the observance of certain fixed rules of outward conduct’.37

Here above all was Smith revolutionary—in seeing ancient and primitive religion as collective rather than individual. Because ‘to us moderns religion is above all a matter of individual conviction and reasoned belief’,38 we assume the same of ancient religion. But ancient religion was in fact the opposite of modern. Because Smith takes for granted that modern religion is a matter of the individual, his revolutionary approach once again stops abruptly. His ‘sociologizing’, as original as it is, is confined to ancient and primitive religion.39

Yet it would be going much too far to assert that for Smith modern religion transcends the group. On the contrary, he argues for the indispensability of the group, or the ‘Church’. Individual Christians properly seek a personal relationship to God, but the Church is indispensable in helping imperfect individuals secure it:

The mutual support and assistance which men can thus render one another in thinking out their Christianity into an intelligible form is just one case of the general doctrine of the Church as an organism in which no part can be developed save in and through the development of the whole.40

On their own, individuals have a limited, unarticulated, ad hoc understanding of God. Only the Church can provide the ‘generalisation’ and ‘system’ that constitutes theology.41

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37 Ibid., 21.
38 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 325.
Still, modern religion for Smith is the religion of the individual. The group abets the individual, but the individual is the beneficiary. When Smith declares that primitive and ancient religion ‘did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society’, he could hardly be stressing the difference between primitive and modern religion more sharply. By contrast, religion for Durkheim anytime and anywhere exists ‘for the preservation and welfare of society’. Even the modern cult of the individual that Durkheim envisions is to be the worship of the nonegoistic individual. Coinciding with the harmonious individuality of organic solidarity, Durkheim’s new religion would thus serve the same social function as the old one.

Smith is rightly viewed as a pioneering sociologist of religion. He shifts the focus of the study of primitive and ancient religion from the individual to the group and from beliefs to rituals, which themselves cease to be taken as autonomous customs and now get taken as whole institutions. For Smith, the function of primitive and ancient religion is the maintenance of the group, even if he does not, like the more relentlessly sociological Durkheim, either make group experience the origin of religion or make the group itself the object of worship. Still, his sociologizing terminates when he turns to modern religion, and he should be called a sociologist of primitive and ancient religion rather than a sociologist of religion itself.

Smith does not go so far as to make individualistic religion anti-social. Magic is anti-social, but magic stands outside religion. Furthermore, there are many other differences between primitive and modern religion besides that of group and individual and that of ritual and belief. Primitive religion is also materialist and amoral, and modern religion also spiritual and moral. For him, the members of each set of characteristics go together, though it is not clear which characteristic of either set, if any, is primary.

Durkheim considers the same four characteristics as Smith but scarcely makes the same associations. For Durkheim, all religion is of the group, including the future religion of the individual. All religion is creedal as well as ritualistic—with Durkheim devoting separate, equally hefty books within The Elementary Forms to belief and to ritual. All religion is spiritual as well as materialist. But all religion, as for Smith, is exclusively moral. Durkheim even defines religion as a ‘single moral community, called a Church’. Magic falls

42 On the differences for Smith between primitive and modern religion, see my introduction to a reprint of the second edition of the Lectures (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), vii–xlii.
43 Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, 62.
outside religion because it is amoral as well as because it does not constitute a group.

Durkheim offers a far fuller sociology of religion than Smith, to whom he is nevertheless gratefully indebted. Not only does he subsume all religion, not merely primitive religion, under sociology, but he subsumes religion under his overall sociology. Where Smith, by profession a biblicist and an Arabist, brilliantly worked out a sociology of primitive religion, Durkheim, as a pioneering sociologist, equally brilliantly applied his sociology to religion per se. Durkheim was able to link religion to society more deeply than Smith, but Smith helped pave the way. For Durkheim, sociology replaces psychology as the explanation of human behavior, including religion, for sociology studies the group where psychology studies the individual. For Smith, sociology explains primitive religion, and theology explains modern religion.

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William Robertson Smith’s Early Work on Prophecy and the Beginnings of Social Anthropology

Joachim Schaper

In 1882, William Robertson Smith published a volume called The Prophets of Israel and their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century BC, a book which grew out of a series of lectures given in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1881–2 and summed up his research on prophecy up to that point.¹ I intend to explore Smith’s understanding of prophecy, but would like to do so on the basis of his earliest known work on the Hebrew prophets, a number of essays, lectures and a review article on contemporary Continental scholarship on prophecy, all of them published, in 1912, by John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal in their volume Lectures & Essays of William Robertson Smith.² My aim in looking at this material is to sketch how Smith approaches one of the key topics in Old Testament research and simultaneously to locate him in the early history of social anthropology, since Smith is perceived by many as being one of the founding fathers of the discipline.

Why is the material interesting, and why is it relevant to historians of Old Testament studies and of anthropological research? Because it shows Smith in the earliest phase of his academic career, with his understanding of Israelite prophecy developing in a constant struggle with the new biblical criticism on the one hand and with the questions posed by what we now call the social sciences and psychology, on the other. The former asked challenging questions on the literary and historical planes, the latter cast a cold eye on religious experience and the human mind.³ The former challenge emerged from the continent of Europe, the latter was ‘home-grown’. Then, of course, there was the theological and ecclesiastical tradition from which Smith came and which had introduced him to the study of prophecy. Smith did his work in the field of force spread out between all those coordinates, and that field was highly charged indeed.

What was Smith’s starting-point? What forced him into devoting so much effort to the understanding of prophecy, as opposed to other areas of Israelite literature and religion? The titles of the articles collected in Lectures & Essays give us some indication: ‘Prophecy and Personality’, ‘The Question of Prophecy in the Critical Schools of the Continent’, ‘The Fulfilment of Prophecy’, ‘Prophecy as a Factor in History’, and ‘Was the Prophetic Inspiration Supernatural?’. It is the relation between the individual and the deity, and between history and revelation, which intrigues Smith and which lets him see the prophetic literature of Israel—and not, say, the Pentateuch—as the most remarkable part of the Israelite heritage. He writes:

Of all the monuments of Israel’s history, the most precious by far to the critical student are the Old Testament prophecies, witnessing as they do to the inner life of the noblest and truest Israelites, representing at once the purest religious conceptions and the deepest national feelings that these ages could show.4

At the very beginning of the fragment on ‘Prophecy and Personality’, Smith formulates a thesis that encapsulates the paradox which sets his exploration of prophecy in motion: ‘While it is true that history and prophecy alike are in all their parts the work of God, it is equally true that both in all their parts are products of human personality.’5 Smith devotes the rest of his essay—which was penned in January 1868, when Smith was 21 years old, and remained a fragment—to demonstrating that his thesis may be paradoxical, but is not nonsensical. In order to do so, he feels that he has to engage with the psychology of his day.

Smith’s view of the mind concurs with that of the idealists amongst the psychologists and philosophers of his day, such as James Ward, the psychologist, and Henry Jackson, the classicist, philosopher and eminent interpreter of Plato, both of whom later exercised great influence on James George Frazer.

In his famous article titled ‘Psychology’ in the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, edited by William Robertson Smith, Ward argued against the empiricist and sensationalist trend of much of British psychology during that period, described by Robert Ackerman as ‘the line of thought,
beginning with Locke and including Hartley, J. S. Mill, and Mill’s follower Bain, that asserts that the mind is essentially a passive instrumentality that receives pictures of the world from stimuli that impinge on it (via the sensorium) through the action of the mechanisms of association and habit’.6

That Ward could take on that empiricist tradition is of course due, as Ackerman points out, to his being informed by the German idealist tradition, which he had imbibed when in Germany. As far as I can see, Ward’s view of the mind ultimately goes back to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Smith was under that very same influence—he had been a diligent reader of Kant in his student days—and it is not surprising that he should have chosen Ward to write the *Britannica* contribution on ‘Psychology’. Smith engaged with the psychological research of his day because, in his own words,

> [i]t is not enough to say that the prophet is not a mere lyre struck by the plectrum of the spirit; to admit that the revelation was not only *through* the prophet but *to* the prophet, and so had to be intelligently apprehended by him before it could be given forth to others—this is not enough unless we carefully observe how much of real personal activity such an intelligent apprehension involves.7

It is clear at whom this note of caution is directed: the die-hard conservatives of his day, proponents of a mechanistic theory of inspiration that Smith, in spite of his full commitment to the Calvinism of the Free Church of Scotland, felt unable to support. This is how he refers to it:

> For many who claim to have risen above a mere mechanical theory of prophecy yet seem to think that what the Spirit presented to the prophet was a ready-made thought or a complete visionary picture of a purely objective kind which he was then able to lay hold of, embody in words, and utter.8

In order to provide his readers with a *reductio ad absurdum* of the mechanistic theory of inspiration favoured by so many of his contemporary fellow-Calvinists, Smith invokes, as we have heard, the insights of idealist psychologists who

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6 R. Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer* (cf. n. 3), 40.
7 W.R. Smith, ‘Prophecy and Personality’ (cf. n. 5), 97–98.
8 Ibid., 98.
stressed the active participation of the observer in the act of perception. He points out ‘that what appears to us as objective is really a product of personal activity acting on certain subjective elements’. In doing so he demonstrates that he is au fait with the psychological debate of his day. Also, and much more importantly, he manages to establish a middle position between the mechanistic (and rather simplistic) doctrine of inspiration held by many of his brethren and the empiricist and materialist conception of the mind promoted by scholars in the tradition of John Stuart Mill and Alexander Bain. With the help of idealist conceptions of the mind in the Kantian tradition he is able to conceptualise the processes of the mind in such a way as to help him to cling to a heavily modified concept of revelation, but a concept of revelation nevertheless.

On the one hand, Smith stresses the active role of the human recipient, pointing out that ‘the new thought’ of the prophets is due to a ‘conscious effort’ and uses ‘certain ideas and representative notions (“Begriffe” and “Vorstellungen”) already present to the prophet’s mind’, and this view goes back to the (rather radical) German Protestant theologian Richard Rothe. On the other hand, Smith hastens to point out that the capacity to come up with ‘a new thought depends on man’s spiritual nature’, and that only the ‘Spirit of God’, acting upon the ‘spirit of man’, can enable that spiritual nature of man ‘to correspond with the necessities of prophecy’. Thus the concept of revelation, which had been shown out the front door, all of a sudden enters again through the back door. Should somebody then ask what exactly the process of revelation was like, Smith has the following answer:

By what creative and inexplicable power God first wrought in the spirit of the prophet that sympathy with His own character which is the true characteristic of the prophetic life is a question for the theologian, not for the historian.

Thus Smith, seeing himself as having refuted the criticism of historians and as having paved the way for theology, stops short of committing himself to a theological position on the matter of inspiration. Again we see him steering a middle course between the old dogmatic positions of the Westminster

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 107.
11 Ibid., 107.
12 W.R. Smith, ‘On the Question of Prophecy’ (cf. n. 4), 187.
confession and the empiricist stance of the mainstream of British psychology.

In all of this he concentrates exclusively on the mind of the individual and on what he perceives as the interaction between the deity and the prophet. He does not venture beyond the individual and into the realm of social organisation. In that he is quite representative of British mainstream biblical scholarship of the day.

All of this was to change when Smith met John Ferguson McLennan (1827–81) in Edinburgh on 29 October 1869. Their conversation on that day and on many later occasions alerted Smith to the importance of an anthropological scrutiny of Old Testament material with a view to deepening the understanding of the history of Israelite religion. The remarkable thing about McLennan’s approach was that it was not psychologically orientated, and that it thus was very much unlike Smith’s work on prophecy up to that point. As Peter Rivière put it in the paper he gave in Aberdeen during the memorial conference held by Professor William Johnstone in 1994,

there remains an all-important point to make. This is to draw attention to McLennan’s sociological approach. McLennan pursues his argument at the level of social institutions which have to be understood and explained in relation to one another. It is on the interrelationship between social forms that he builds his evolutionary framework and not on the biological or psychological characteristics of the individual.13

McLennan can indeed be called the first social anthropologist. Evans-Pritchard writes that he ‘in a strict sense was the first major writer in the history of social anthropology, and in that sense its founder’.14 It is the evolutionary approach advocated by McLennan which deeply appeals to Smith’s taste, and which he from then on applies to his own reconstruction of the history of the religion of the Semites. I think that there is a very specific reason for this taking over of McLennan’s key concept, and of McLennan’s theory of totemism and its role in the development of religion. The reason behind this key decision made by Smith in the Seventies is that he perceived that evolutionism as coinciding with, as being co-extensive with, his—Smith’s—concept of


progressive revelation. Approaching the problem from both the scientific and the Christian theological angle, the net result was the same: What expressed itself in empirical social reality was the empirical witness to the underlying fact that God had set in motion a process of truth being revealed in human history. Smith saw it as ‘a general law of human history that truth is consistent, progressive and imperishable’.\footnote{Quoted according to R.P. Carroll, ‘The Biblical Prophets as Apologists for the Christian Religion: Reading William Robertson Smith’s The Prophets of Israel today’, in: W. Johnstone (ed.), William Robertson Smith (cf. n. 13), 148–57 (at 149).} This perceived coincidence between the scientific evolutionism of McLennan in his key work on primitive marriage and the concept of revelation enabled Smith to accept McLennan’s theory lock, stock and barrel.

Smith had responded, in his early work on prophecy, to the ‘modernisation crisis’ which his church, and the whole of British—and not just British—Protestantism, was undergoing at the time. He had desperately tried to bridge the gap between his church, which was opting for the religious outlook and intellectual arsenal of the seventeenth century (with a dose of nineteenth century religious fervour added in for good measure), and the prevalent agnosticism and materialism of the mainstream of Victorian scientific enquiry. For a few years he had found, at least for himself, the balance which he desired to establish. The German idealist philosophical tradition had helped him to find that balance. The problem was that the balance was illusory.

Once he had discovered the importance of the questions McLennan was asking Smith moved away from the exploration of prophecy and prophetic individuals and concentrated instead on questions that can properly be called anthropological, i.e. questions that concern institutions and social structures.

From the time of his meeting with McLennan in Edinburgh onwards he realised that the key to the understanding of the religion of the Semites, and thus to that of the Hebrews, was the exploration of their institutions and their social organisation, as opposed to speculation about the states of mind of a few individuals deemed to be their ‘noblest and truest’ representatives. Smith consequently ceased altogether working on prophecy; after 1885—in which year his book on Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia, the most important result of his interaction with McLennan’s work, was published—he did not publish on prophecy ever again.

It is a tragic irony that the presumed insights of McLennan, which had triggered off Robertson Smith’s work on kinship in early Arabia, were themselves as illusory as Smith’s earlier balance between Calvinist dogmatism
and scientific materialism. The whole edifice of the theory of totemism and exogamy came crashing down in the twentieth century, and the rubble was cleared away by Lévi-Strauss. Wellhausen had become suspicious of the totemism theory early on, when Smith was still alive.

However, the obsession with totemism had provoked Smith to do ground-breaking work and to cast a new light not just on the Old Testament, but on the whole of the religious and social world of the Semitic peoples.

Yet again Smith did not content himself with the anthropological and historical insights he had won. Rather, he used these insights in order to produce a piece of Christian apologetics intended to make room for Christian belief again, and to do so precisely on the basis of ‘scientific’—i.e. historical and anthropological—insights. It is the way in which Smith deals with the potential blow to theology delivered by anthropology that gives us a valuable insight into Smith’s mind and his personality. I think it is fair to say that the hidden agenda of Smith’s academic work was the refoundation of key theological concepts in a period that presented Christianity with formidable challenges. This becomes obvious from his attempt, at the end of his essay on animal worship, to deal with the potential embarrassment caused by the perceived existence of such worship—or at least of ‘superstition of the totem kind’, as Smith puts it16—in Israel, and indeed well into the exilic period, if not beyond. This is how he puts it:

> It is a favourite speculation that the Hebrews or the Semites in general have a natural capacity for spiritual religion. They are either represented as constitutionally monotheistic, or at least we are told that their worship had in it from the first, and apart from revelation, a lofty character from which spiritual ideas were easily developed. That was not the opinion of the prophets, who always deal with their nation as one peculiarly inaccessible to spiritual truths and possessing no natural merit which could form the ground of its choice as the people of Jehovah. Our investigations appear to confirm this judgment, and to show that the superstitions with which the spiritual religion had to contend were not one whit less degrading than those of the most savage nations.17

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So Smith now defends the honour of the prophets as opposed to that of the mass of the Israelites. The prophets retain their place of honour, but now, given the anthropological insights he thinks he has won, he has to play down the significance of the Israelites as a collective in the history of religion. Ten years earlier Smith had put things very differently:

The time is gone when the sources of the prophetic inspiration could be sought in an artificial aesthetical culture, in political intrigue, above all, in pious fraud. The starting-point in all critical study of prophecy lies in the acknowledgement that the prophetic writings are the true key to the marvellous religious development, which is, in fact, the kernel of all Israel’s history.¹⁸

Thus, in 1870, Smith had thought the prophets were representative of that ‘marvellous religious development’, whereas in 1880 he held the view that the prophets were a lonely élite in a nation that was ‘peculiarly inaccessible to spiritual truths and possessing no natural merit’.¹⁹

Of course, the more work Smith did, and the more he developed a unified interpretation of the evidence for the primitive religion of the Semites and its influence on later developments, the harder he had to work to leave, or indeed find, room for his defence of the truth of Christianity.

In the third chapter of his Lectures on the Religion of the Semites, he delivers a particularly eloquent and elegant defence of a core concept of traditional Judaism and Christianity, a concept that was being acutely threatened by the pervasive materialism and immanentism of the scientific enquiry of his time. Having demonstrated that the religion of the Semites, like any other, necessarily had to have gone through a phase of totemism—‘that the Semites did pass through the totem stage’, as he puts it—, Smith says, addressing the contrast between Hebrew and other Semitic concepts of the deity:

The burden of explaining this contrast does not lie with us; it falls on those who are compelled by a false philosophy of revelation to see in the Old Testament nothing more than the highest fruit of the general tendencies of Semitic religion. That is not the view that study

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commends to me. It is a view that is not commended but condemned by the many parallelisms in detail between Hebrew and heathen story and ritual. For all these material points of resemblance only make the contrast in spirit the more remarkable.21

Smith thus leaves room for revelation, which is at the secret centre of his reconstruction of Semitic religion. Smith’s earlier approach to prophecy, witnessed to by the lectures and essays I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, had been a dead end which, in a dialectical manner, led to the breakthrough which enabled Smith finally to interpret the Old Testament evidence from an anthropological perspective and simultaneously to defend the view that revelation was the decisive event in the development of Semitic religion from ‘savage ritual and institutions of totem type’22 to something else.

This view had already been foreshadowed in Smith’s essay on ‘Animal Worship and Animal Tribes’ in 1880 when he wrote that ‘[i]t does not appear that Israel was, by its own wisdom (italics mine), more fit than any other nation to rise above the lowest level of heathenism’23—quite a statement, and quite shocking to the ears of the traditionalists. However, like the passage from the second series of the Religion of the Semites which I quoted,24 it is intended to ensure one thing: the survival, in the church and in scholarship, of the concept of revelation.

What is the sum total of all of the above? Smith emerges as a scholar who, for a rather long time in his rather short life, expended much energy on defending scientifically the scientifically indefensible and on proving the scientifically unprovable. Unlike his good friend, Julius Wellhausen, he chose to opt for a third way between traditionalism and unfettered scholarly enquiry: Smith promoted and practised an approach that ultimately sees biblical studies as beholden to certain key doctrines, like a specific concept of revelation, and as serving the church.


22 W.R. Smith, Religion (cf. n. 20), 138.


24 Cf. above, n. 21.
Smith is universally extolled for his stance in the persecution wrought upon him by the Free Church of his time. However, the clichés employed by some colleagues who sing his praises are quite beside the point. Compare the following statement by Robert Carroll, written in 1995:

As a biblical scholar living and working in contemporary Scotland I am all too familiar with the reactionary conservatism which drives the philistinism of current Presbyterian politics, so my sympathies are all with Smith in his crucifixion last century. ‘Twas ever thus! The forces of reaction have tended to dominate the various forms of Christian religion since Herod and Pilate compounded to crucify the Jew Jesus.  

Things were not quite as clear-cut as Carroll assumed they were. The tragic irony of the matter was that Smith himself was a conservative, albeit a liberal one. And this is exactly why he got caught in the machinery of Free Church evangelical dogmatism. As so often happens, those who are closest to each other get involved in particularly unpleasant conflicts.

In the struggles raging in biblical scholarship in his day, Smith occupied a middle position between the radical approach of many German and other Continental scholars on the one hand and the intransigence of many British traditionalists on the other. In that sense, his position was very similar to that of Samuel Rolles Driver, who also served as a mediator between German radicalism and British traditionalists. Driver was fortunate enough to be doing that work in the context of the Anglican establishment and its genteel way of solving, or simply tolerating, tensions. Smith was not so fortunate. He had to take a stand, and did so admirably. However, he was not a radical. He was a liberal conservative.

This is not unimportant. And it is not just about locating Smith in the overall context of ecclesiastical politics. Rather, it is necessary to understand this point in order to understand why Smith experienced his anthropological breakthrough only in 1880, and not ten years earlier.

However, it was a remarkable breakthrough that established Smith as one of the centrally important figures in social anthropology. Although Smith’s anthropologically orientated study of Arabic and Hebrew material had in a sense only reinforced his theology-driven understanding of Israelite prophecy—confirming once more, in Smith’s view, what a massive gulf there was

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between everyday Israelite religious practice and the spiritual religion of the prophets—, it had freed him to see the value of an anthropological reading of the Hebrew Bible and other Semitic literature. Driven by this insight, Smith wrote his *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* and, widening his field of research even further, produced the public addresses that were later revised, amplified and published as the *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*.

These two works established his reputation as one of the most significant ancestors of what was later named social anthropology. His importance in a way eclipses that of McLennan. Peter Rivière comments that ‘[v]ery few anthropologists any longer read McLennan’s works and most have only the most general and haziest notion about what they contain. McLennan has been all but deprived of his ancestorhood and teeters on the edge of intellectual oblivion. One of the lifelines which keeps him from falling into it is his link with Smith.’  

Smith received from McLennan a theory of totemism that, while flawed—as became obvious in the twentieth century—, nevertheless provided Smith with a central methodological insight which enabled him to do his groundbreaking work on Semitic religion. This is how Smith describes that all-important methodological insight:

> The advantage of J.F. McLennan’s totem hypothesis over all previous theories of primitive heathenism is that it does justice to the intimate relation between religion and the fundamental structure of society which is so characteristic of the ancient world, and that the truth of the hypothesis can be tested by observation of the social organisation as well as the religious beliefs and practices of early races.27

This is why Peter Rivière stresses that ‘[i]t is not Smith’s application of McLennan’s evolutionary schema that is significant but the transmission of McLennan’s sociological method; a method that has remained central to social anthropology’, triggered off Durkheim’s sociological study of religion and runs ‘through Radcliffe-Brown to Evans-Pritchard, and so into one of the mainstreams of British social anthropological thought’.29

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28 P. Rivière, ‘William Robertson Smith and John Ferguson McLennan’ (cf. n. 13), 301.
29 Ibid., 301.
From Pietism to Totemism:  
William Robertson Smith and Tübingen  

Bernhard Maier

A paper discussing the relationship of William Robertson Smith with Tübingen may suitably take as its starting-point the unsigned article ‘Tübingen’ in vol. 23 of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:¹

TÜBINGEN, the university town of Würtemberg, is picturesquely situated on the hilly and well-wooded banks of the Neckar, at the junction of the Ammer and Steinlach, 18 miles south of Stuttgart, and on the S.E. border of the Black Forest. The older town is irregularly built and unattractive, but the newer suburbs, the chief of which is the Wilhelmsstrasse, are handsome. [. . .] Tübingen’s chief claim to attention lies in its famous university, founded in 1477 by Duke Eberhard. The university adopted the Reformed faith in 1534, and in 1536 a Protestant theological seminary—the so-called Stift—was incorporated with it. In 1817 a Roman Catholic theological faculty (the “Convict”) and a faculty of politics and economics were added, and in 1863 a faculty of science. The leading faculty has long been that of theology, and an advanced school of theological criticism, the founder and chief light of which was F. C. BAUR (*q.v.*), is known as the Tübingen school. [. . .]

While it cannot be ruled out that this article was written by Smith himself, a more likely candidate for its authorship would seem to be his close friend and biographer John Sutherland Black (1846–1923), who had actually been a student at the University of Tübingen in the summer of 1868 and by the 1880s had come to be assistant editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.² Be that as it may, the Tübingen School of Theology had certainly been discussed (and dismissed) by Smith some thirteen years earlier in his famous article ‘Bible’.*³

² See the anonymous obituary of J. S. Black in *The Times*, 21 February 1923.
Can we say of all the New Testament books that they are either directly apostolic, or at least stand in immediate dependence on genuine apostolic teaching which they honestly represent? or must we hold, with an influential school of modern critics, that a large proportion of the books are direct forgeries, written in the interest of theological tendencies, to which they sacrifice without hesitation the genuine history and teaching of Christ and his apostles? [. . .] The theory has two bases, one philosophical or dogmatical, the other historical; and it cannot be pretended that the latter basis is adequate if the former is struck away.

However, the name of Tübingen is associated not only with the Tübingen School of Theology, but just as much or even more with what is in some respects its very opposite—Pietism. To this day, the name to conjure with in this context is that of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), author of the widely disseminated and highly influential New Testament commentary *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* and eponymous hero of the student hall of residence known as the *Albrecht-Bengel-Haus*.

One of the most influential representatives of South German Pietism, Bengel is commonly associated with Philipp Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke and Nicolaus Graf von Zinzendorf who are regarded as the founding fathers of the Pietistic movement. In many ways, they may also be taken to have been precursors of English and Welsh Evangelicalism, a movement usually associated with Howell Harris, Daniel Rowland, George Whitfield and the brothers John and Charles Wesley. These men, in turn, were of pivotal importance for the rise of Scottish Evangelicalism as propagated by theologians such as John Witherspoon, John Erskine, Thomas Chalmers and Robert Smith Candlish. The son of a Free Church minister, Smith may be taken to have grown up with a form of Christianity which in many ways was characteristic of German Pietism as much as of British Evangelicalism. This becomes obvious when we take a closer look at what D. W. Bebbington has defined as the four most salient features of Evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. As we shall see, these features were ubiquitous in Smith’s background and upbringing. For this reason, they need to be given careful consideration if we wish to fully understand Smith’s later career.

634–48 (quotation at 643–4).

‘Conversions’, maintained Bebbington, ‘were the goal of personal effort, the collective aim of churches, the theme of Evangelical literature. [. . .] Since conversion was the one gateway to vital Christianity, parents looked anxiously for signs in it in their growing children’. The Smiths were certainly no exception to this rule, as we know from Pirie Smith’s account of his famous son’s childhood and adolescence:

Before he was twelve years old, he had several attacks of illness so severe that once and again his life was despaired of, but also in the course of these years we had the consolation of learning that a work of grace was wrought upon him and in such a form that he was at length delivered from the fear of death and made partaker of a hope full of immortality. That the change wrought upon him was real, we had many satisfactory evidences—not the less satisfactory that there was no parade of piety, no sanctimoniousness, but a cheerful performance of daily duty, truthfulness in word and deed, and a conscientiousness which we could not help thinking was sometimes almost morbid.

The passage is interesting in several respects, not least for its implicit affirmation that conversion might be gradual (‘in the course of these years’) rather than sudden, a question hotly disputed and frequently discussed by Evangelicals. Equally interesting is Pirie Smith’s implicit reluctance to make conversion (and religious convictions in general) the subject of prying investigations:

To say the truth I do not now and I never did approve of the practice, at one time, and perhaps still, very usual, of asking young people, or for that matter old people too, such questions as Have you been converted? Are you a child of God? and the like. And I have not in all my experience found reason to put much confidence in the answer given to such questions, but rather the reverse. It seems to me that children so trained are more likely than otherwise to learn hypocrisy – and I have some reason in my experience for this opinion. So the custom was not in use in our family; and we have no cause for regret on that account.

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5 Bebbington (as above, n. 4), 5–7.
6 Memoir by William Pirie Smith, composed in 1883 (Aberdeen, Queen Mother Library, Special Collections, AU MS 3674), 2.
7 Memoir by William Pirie Smith (as above, n. 6), 29.
As far as we can tell, Smith kept this reticence inculcated at the parental manse to the end of his days. He was, as his father claimed rather approvingly in a letter dated 11 June 1877, ‘not a man fond of making professions or parading his belief’. 8 ‘I confess I never understood his inmost views on religion’, admitted J. G. Frazer with characteristic candour in a letter dated 15 December 1897. ‘On this subject he maintained a certain reserve which neither I nor (so far as I know) any of his intimates cared to break through’.9

As regards activism, the second conspicuous characteristic of Evangelicalism according to Bebbington, the reader may be referred to the childhood recollections of Smith’s younger sister Alice. Writing in her old age for the benefit of her children and grandchildren, she gave a vivid and detailed description of her father’s extensive extra-ministerial activities:10

He set up evening classes for young men, teaching them and lecturing to them. We had an electric generator and a magic lantern with astronomical charts at home, which father had bought for these classes, and viewing them occasionally in winter in our children’s room would always give us enormous pleasure. [. . .] When the brothers grew up, father taught them himself until they entered University and passed the entrance examination connected with this. [. . .] But every boy from the whole area who was keen to learn knew that he only had to approach father and point out his wishes and plans. When he was convinced that there was a determination to learn, he had the candidate come and see him every morning and taught him in the study side by side with his own sons. [. . .] All his spare hours, which became more numerous as he grew older, he divided up between reading and mathematics.

Pirie Smith’s eldest son obviously continued this habit of restless mental activity. ‘He often spoke gratefully of his father’s training in accuracy, and still more

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10 Memoir of Alice Smith Thiele, composed around 1930 and now in family possession, 18–19. Mrs. Astrid Hess kindly supplied me with a copy of the German original which was translated and edited by herself and Gordon K. Booth as Children of the Manse. Growing up in Victorian Aberdeenshire (Edinburgh 2004). Here as elsewhere in this article, all translations of texts originally written in German are by myself (B. M.).
in rapidity, of work’, recalled J. S. Black.11 A vivid picture of Smith’s working habits at Cambridge is given by the Master of Christ’s College, as quoted by Smith’s biographers:12

At that time he was very busy preparing his Burnett Lectures, and I recollect that after a hard day’s work in the Library he used to return to his rooms about five o’clock, having stopped after the Library closed to finish some piece of his official business, and immediately set to at his book and work hard till seven; and all this without luncheon—he always mistrusted luncheons. Soon after Hall he would be back at his work and write hard till long past midnight. I never could understand how he did it, but his marvellous nervous force carried him on—up to a certain point.

As Emily Wright told their common friend Michael Jan de Goeje during Smith’s last and ultimately fatal illness:13 ‘He is cheerful, & excitable as usual & employs himself the entire day even though confined to a couch’.

Biblicism, needless to say, was another conspicuous feature of the Free Manse at Keig. “Book”, recalled the mother of the future heresiarch with evident satisfaction, ‘was one of the first words he could say & as an infant he must have a book to hold when he saw others with their Bibles at Worship’.14 This was hardly surprising in a household where sessions of family worship would be held on a daily basis both mornings and evenings. As Smith’s sister Alice recalled: ‘First we sang [a psalm], then we read a chapter [from the Bible], Old Testament in the morning, New Testament in the evening. [. . .] At the conclusion everybody knelt down while Father prayed’.15 The comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the Biblical text which Smith acquired in this way is illustrated by an anecdote transmitted by his mother:16

It was a favourite occupation with the younger members of the family, when he came home over a Sabbath (which he often did when he lived in Abd) to gather round him, each having a Bible in hand & try to

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13 Letter dated 30 December 1892 (Leiden, University Library, BPL 2389).
14 Memoir by Jane Smith, 2.
15 Memoir by Alice Smith Thiele, 28.
16 Memoir by Jane Smith, 8.
puzzle him. They looked out a verse—not an outstanding passage, but one that perhaps there might be others very like it, & having read it, they expected him to tell the book, chapter & verse. Very rarely did he fail, even in telling the verse.

However, it is also worth while to recall the spirit in which the Bible was read in the paternal manse. As Pirie Smith remembered in his old age:17

I drank in the ordinary traditional views with my mother’s milk—and and all my early surroundings conspired to work these views into the very substance of my being. It may serve to illustrate what I mean, if I mention that during the earlier years of my life I would not have ventured to doubt that even the last chapter of Deuteronomy which relates to the death and burial of Moses was written by Moses himself! Even at a somewhat recent period it was with great difficulty, and not without grave scruples that I could be persuaded at family worship, to omit the singing of certain Psalms and portions of Psalms; and to pass over, in the orderly reading of the word, genealogical tables and certain chapters which need not now be specified. Nay, I still remember having, when a mere boy, made a not unnatural remark upon the orders which David, on his death-bed, gave to Solomon, respecting Joab and Shimei; and that my conscience continued, for many years, to chide me on that account.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of the extent to which the Bible pervaded everybody’s lives at the manse of Keig is provided by Pirie Smith’s account of the end of his second son George, who died unexpectedly at the age of 18, exactly three weeks after graduating from Aberdeen University as the best student of his year:18

During the final struggle he seemed to be entangled in deep water but just before all was over he cried out in rapture “Mamma, Mary Jane! I am safe through now.” “And your feet on the rock?” said his mother. His answer was “Yes” and then all was over.

It does not take Smith’s matchless knowledge of the Bible to suspect that the

17 Reflections of W. P. Smith, Chapter First, 2.
18 Memoir by William Pirie Smith, 25.
dying young man in his agony was re-living the anguish which is so graphically described in Psalm 69, 2. In the words of the Scottish Psalter:

   Save me, O God, because the floods / do so environ me,
   That ev’n unto my very soul / come in the waters be.
   I downward in deep mire do sink, / where standing there is none:
   I am into deep waters come, / where floods have o’er me gone.

While there is good evidence that both Pirie Smith and his eldest son had a wide command of fictional literature, there can be little doubt that it was the Book of Books which supplied the model on which they interpreted their experience. When Pirie Smith looked back on his own remarkable career from wood-turner via school teacher and school director to Free Church minister, he fell back on words from the Book of Isaiah (42,16), claiming that he ‘was led, like the blind, by a way that I knew not’. In a similar spirit, his eldest son—as if to defy the critics who had accused him of rashness—adorned the portrait which his friend George Reid’s had painted at an early stage of the heresy trial with another verse from the Book of Isaiah (28,16):

יְהָעַל שִׁירָת

‘He that believeth shall not make haste’.

But what about the fourth and last fixed point of the ‘Bebbington quadrilateral’, crucicentrism? In John Wesley’s view, the doctrine of Atonement was ‘properly the distinguishing point between Deism and Christianity’. Consequently, Evangelicals usually set great store by the view that Christ died as a substitute for sinful mankind, an idea which can ultimately be traced back via Anselm of Canterbury to the writings of St. Paul. The Pauline letters were obviously familiar to Smith at an early age, as we may infer from the recollections of a visitor at the paternal manse:

On the occasion of my first visit, Dr. Smith was lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans, and, during the days when he was preparing his lectures, he would discuss with his sons the Greek text of St. Paul. Even then William—he was perhaps fifteen at the time—showed a wonderful knowledge of Biblical literature, and seemed to have the argument of that grand compendium of Pauline theology at his fingers’ ends.

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20 Autobiographical memoir of W. P. Smith (family possession), 17.
21 Quoted by Bebbington, 14.
22 Quoted in Black and Chrystal, 18.
Nevertheless, it has been remarked that Smith rejected the ‘satisfaction’ model of sacrifice, emphasising in its stead the communal character of sacrifice.\(^{23}\) To understand why this should have been so, it is worth while to take a closer look at what John Rogerson has called ‘The German Connection’.\(^{24}\)

Smith started learning German in the winter of 1865–66, with a view to spending the following summer session in a German university. When his brother George died unexpectedly in April 1866, Smith put these plans aside for the time being, but took them up again some months later towards the close of his first year in Edinburgh.\(^{25}\) The immediate reasons for this decision are given in a letter which Smith wrote on 6 February 1867 to his friend Archibald MacDonald:\(^{26}\)

> I have settled to go to Tübingen during the summer. It is quite necessary to have a good knowledge of German if one is to do any good in the second Hebrew class. Indeed I have found it necessary to read a good deal of German this winter which of course is rather slow work as I cannot always dispense with the Dictionary.

Having been provided with a letter of introduction to Carl Schaarschmidt, at that time professor of Philosophy at the University of Bonn, Smith reached the Rhineland in the second half of April, only to find that his plans met with several objections. As his father recalled:\(^{27}\)

> When he reached Bonn he called on Prof. Schaarschmidt to whom he had an introduction and, having learned from him, that the object which he had in view in visiting Germany might be attained at least equally well there as in Tübingen and that the place was in other respects more desirable as a residence, he resolved there to remain during the summer.

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\(^{25}\) Memoir of William Pirie Smith, 37–8; cf. Black and Chrystal, 60 and 63.

\(^{26}\) CUL Add. Mss. 7446 C 64.

\(^{27}\) Memoir of William Pirie Smith, 51.
Just why Bonn should have been judged to be ‘more desirable as a residence’ is by no means obvious, but as Smith’s host was born and bred in Berlin, he may well have found Tübingen both devoid of urban amenities and impedimental to the acquisition of standard High German. At any rate, when six years later Henry Drummond spent the summer semester in Tübingen, he declared the local speech to be ‘a fearful dialect, which Berliners cannot understand at all, at least when the peasants speak’.28

Smith planned his second stay in Germany together with J. S. Black in the spring of 1869.29 Quoting from a letter which he had received from Carl Schaarschmidt, Smith told Black that he was inclined to follow his former host’s recommendation and go to Göttingen rather than Berlin or Heidelberg, as there was the prospect of getting well acquainted with Albrecht Ritschl who had been teaching in Bonn from 1846–1864 and was a close friend of Schaarschmidt’s. Born in 1822, Ritschl had studied Protestant Theology in Bonn, Halle, Heidelberg and Tübingen.30 Having completed his second doctorate at Bonn (with a study on Marcion and the Gospel according to Luke), he had become Professor of New Testament and Early Church History at Bonn in 1852 and Professor of Dogmatics and Ethics at Göttingen in 1864. When Smith first met Ritschl in early May 1869, the latter had just embarked on what was soon to become the central piece of his theology, a three-volume study on the Christian doctrine of atonement. Having attended Ritschl’s lectures for three weeks, Smith sent his father a glowing appreciation of his teaching which is well worth quoting in full:31

Did I tell you about Ritschl? He was a pupil of Baur’s but too acute to remain in the Tübingen School & was accordingly renounced by Baur both scientifically and personally. He now takes a very independent course, freely criticising the established positions; but cherishing much greater respect for the reformers than for the present dogmatic. In fact the old reformation Dogmatic seems to be what he values most highly.

His course on Ethics is very interesting both historically and

28 Quoted from George Adam Smith, The Life of Henry Drummond (London 1899), 49.
29 Letter to J. S. Black dated 17 April 1869 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 C 64).
practically. He has been treating of Conversion of Good Works and is now on the subject of assurance of Grace on which he has given us the Lutheran & Reformed doctrine and is now proceeding to explain the nature of Pietism & Methodism as grounded on a desire to obtain Assurance by being able to assign a distinct point as the point of conversion. Ritschl of course objects to this, urging that conversion is almost never a sudden thing except in the case of very vicious men—that in men who have been under good influences the process of conversion is generally gradual. At the same time R. of course agrees with all protestants against Romanists in regarding Assurance as very necessary. He has not yet given his own positive views on the subject but seems to lean most to the Calvinistic doctrine.

I have never heard anything so interesting on a theological subject as Ritschl’s lectures. He has evidently such thorough clearness in his own views & such complete acquaintance with the views of others as make his lectures exceedingly instructive.

Being of a notoriously impetuous and energetic temperament, Smith must have found Ritschl’s aversion to any kind of metaphysical speculation, his abhorrence of mysticism and his insistence on the ethical, active and practical side of Christianity eminently attractive. Moreover, he was evidently thrilled to find that some of Ritschl’s views could be taken to confirm ideas held and advocated by his father. This is certainly true of Ritschl ‘urging that conversion is almost never a sudden thing’, which is precisely the point which Pirie Smith wished to make when he maintained that his son’s conversion occurred ‘in the course of these years’. In another letter to his father, Smith explicitly pointed out this convergence of ideas:

Ritschl in fact holds, so far as I can see, a doctrine which I think you hold too, that where a child is faithfully brought up under Xtn influences we may feel a confidence that God will begin a work of grace in his heart even before his personal consciousness begins.

The extent of Ritschl’s influence on Smith is difficult to gauge, as thirteen letters and one undated postcard from Ritschl to Smith is all that has survived

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32 See above, n. 6.
33 Letter dated 7 July 1869 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 C 118).
of their correspondence.34 These letters cover the period from July 1870 to December 1881, with a major gap between October 1873 and February 1877. Smith’s letters to Ritschl appear to have been lost, although some if not all of them must have been still extant when Otto Ritschl wrote his father’s biography, quoting from a letter dated 9 February 1877 and mentioning two others, dated 23 April and 24 October 1871 respectively.35 Yet despite the sparseness of the evidence, there can be no doubt that Ritschl was a major influence on the budding Scottish theologian, as may be seen from Smith’s retrospective acknowledgement of it in response to a question about ‘books which had influenced him’ which was put to the erstwhile professor of Old Testament Exegesis in 1891:36

“Your request about theologians,” he wrote to his correspondent, “is rather puzzling. A. B. Davidson, Rothe (Zur Dogmatik), Ewald, Ritschl come into my mind at once as leading influences, and I think I should add Dr. John Bruce. Then, of men of past ages, Luther certainly; Calvin, I suppose, had an influence, but I can’t place it very well in my present resulting state of thought. I don’t think any of the Fathers ever did much for me; the influence of Augustine was chiefly negative. I don’t think I can count any of the Systematic Theologians—not even Ames, though I admired his clear dialectic. No Anglican writer comes into my list. I begin to think I never can have been a theologian. Ecce Homo impressed me at the time; I don’t know that it left any permanent result,—not so much as Christmas Eve and Easter Day. For the Middle Ages, Dante.”

A first point to be noted about this remarkable passage is the absence of the name with which that of Smith is most closely associated in the modern history of Old Testament Studies, Julius Wellhausen.37 In 1899, John Forbes White quoted Wellhausen as having informed him by letter that he ‘came to know Robertson Smith in 1871, when in our conversation he opposed my views with vigour. Afterwards we had much correspondence’.38 However, ‘1871’ is

34 CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 596–D 609 and F 55.
36 Black and Chrystal, 534–5.
37 On him, see most recently Rudolf Smend, Julius Wellhausen. Ein Bahnbrecher in drei Disziplinen (München 2006).
most probably a mistake (or misprint) for ‘1872’, this being the year of their first acquaintance given in E. G. Browne’s obituary of Smith (which, it should be noted, is stated to be based on personal information from J.S.Black who had accompanied Smith to Göttingen in 1869 and thus would have known if Smith and Wellhausen had met at that time).39 This is confirmed by J.S.Black’s account of Smith for the Dictionary of National Biography (which explicitly dates their first acquaintance to 1872) and squares nicely with Wellhausen telling Smith in May 1889 that Felix Klein, whom he had not seen for 17 years, had just visited the University of Marburg.40 Yet despite their comparatively early acquaintance, Smith’s and Wellhausen’s voluminous correspondence does not appear to have started before the autumn of 1878, and until his detailed review of Geschichte Israels I, published on 17 May 1879, Smith appears to have mentioned Wellhausen’s work only rarely and rather cautiously in his publications, commenting on ‘that clearness and somewhat rude force which mark all Wellhausen’s work’, and concluding that ‘his investigation, even in its present imperfect state, points to inferences of great interest for the history of the Old Testament’.41 The conclusion seems inevitable that until 1878/79, Smith and Wellhausen were not on familiar terms and that it was only in the wake of Wellhausen’s involvement in the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Smith’s increasing absorption in Arabic history and philology that they became close friends.

The case of Abraham Kuenen, whose name is also conspicuous by its absence from the passage quoted above, is similar and yet different. Like Wellhausen, Kuenen makes his appearance as a correspondent rather late, his first letter to Smith dating from June 1880.42 Yet, despite the lateness of their correspondence, there can be little doubt that Kuenen’s writings were a major influence on Smith from at least 1870 onwards.43 Born at Haarlem in 1828,

Kuenen had become full professor in the theological faculty of the University of Leiden at the early age of 27. In 1861–1865 he published a three-volume introduction to the Old Testament, *Historisch-Kritisch Onderzoek naar het ontstaan en de verzameling van de boeken des Ouden Verbonds*, in which he still adhered to the view that at the origin of the Pentateuch was a ‘Book of Origins’ (*Grundschrift*) which contained elements dating back to the time of Moses and which had reached its present form by the beginning of the exile. However, following further researches by Karl Heinrich Graf and John W. Colenso, Kuenen was subsequently converted to the view that both the historical parts and the laws of the alleged *Grundschrift* were in fact the latest strata of the Hexateuch, forming a ‘Priestly Code’ (P) dating to the time of Ezra or even later. This is the view propounded in his two-volume monograph *De Godsdienst van Israël tot den Ondergang van den Joodschen Staat* (1869–1870), which was published in an English translation as *The Religion of Israel to the Fall of the Jewish State* (1874–1875). In this book, Kuenen propagated a completely naturalistic view of Israel’s religious history, rejecting the notion of a special revelation and taking the preaching of Amos and Hosea as the start of ethical monotheism.

In an 1870 essay on prophecy, for which he had used the first volume of *De Godsdienst van Israël*, Smith declared himself to be ‘impressed by [Kuenen’s] cold pellucidity of thought which lays bare to himself and others the real principles and unavoidable problems of a purely naturalistic criticism’, contrasting the view of the prophets held by Ewald with those of Kuenen who ‘would have everything explained by the psychology of ordinary life’.44 While Smith in this article assumed the standpoint of an impartial observer who is content with weighing the historical evidence, he made no secret of his dislike for Kuenen’s rejection of supernaturalism in his first review for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, castigating in Kuenen’s work his ‘extremely rationalistic principles which separate it from our sympathy’.45 As Smith put it in his review of the first volume of *Jahrbücher für Protestantische Theologie* published in 1875:46

No doubt important results will accrue from the active investigation of religious history that is now going on, but one of the chief results,

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we feel sure, will be to bring out more clearly than ever the absolute uniqueness of Christianity, and the impossibility of explaining its central conceptions and facts without calling in the aid of the supernatural.

In the famous or rather infamous 1876 *Edinburgh Courant* review of Smith’s *EB* article ‘Bible’ (which had been published at about the same time), the anonymous author—later revealed to have been Professor A. H. Charteris—stated that\(^47\)

we had scarcely begun the article till we found that we were reading a reproduction of the well-known theories of Kuenen, the most “advanced” theologian in Holland. [. . .] We catch Kuenen’s very words when we are told that Deuteronomy is a prophetic legislative “programme.”

In view of Smith’s repeated affirmation of supernaturalism, this allegation was obviously rather misleading, as Kuenen himself was not slow to point out in a public letter dated 16 January 1877:\(^48\)

It is true that several positions on points of Old Testament criticism which Professor Smith either fairly states or partially endorses are to be found also in my “Religion of Israel.” But how could this be otherwise? [. . .] That it is out of the question to speak of slavish dependence or paraphrase is in the present case all the more clear, inasmuch as Professor Smith deals on the one hand with various matters on which I have expressed myself either not at all or only cursorily (text, version editions of the O. Testament), while, on the other hand he expressly adopts upon important points opinions differing from mine.

Yet if Kuenen was such a major influence on the development of Smith’s critical views, why does his name not figure in the above-quoted list of ‘books which had influenced him’, although this list includes the names of Heinrich Ewald and Richard Rothe? The answer must be that, from a theological point of view, Smith regarded Ewald’s and Rothe’s influence as more significant

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\(^{48}\) ‘Professor Kuenen on the charge of Plagiarism against Professor W. Robertson Smith’, *The Scotsman*, 22 January 1877, 4.
than that of Kuenen. Presumably, Smith felt that finding the most convincing explanation for the composition of the Pentateuch and providing the most plausible picture of Israel’s religious history so far might be fine achievements in themselves, but that these achievements were theologially of much less consequence than those of Ewald and Rothe. This, Smith repeatedly claimed, consisted in their distinction between revelation and Bible: 49

The Bible is not revelation but the record of divine revelation—the record of those historical facts in which God has revealed himself to man. That God really has so revealed Himself to man—not that we possess an inspired record of this revelation—is the point on which Christianity stands or falls.

This interpretation may also serve to explain why Smith regarded Ritschl as the ‘Urvater (only begetter) of the Aberdeen heresy’, a designation which Ritschl himself was unable to account for, as he could not recall having ever discussed the problems of Pentateuch criticism with Smith. 50 Obviously, Kuenen did not qualify for the epithet of heresiarch because Smith was fundamentally at odds with him theologially, affirming supernaturalism and regarding his adoption of Kuenen’s historical conclusions as a mere corollary of taking Ewald’s and Rothe’s historical view of the Bible. Ewald and Rothe in their turn could hardly be blamed either, as Smith held their position—vastly different from the critical stance of Kuenen and Wellhausen—to be fully in line with that of Reformers such as Luther and Zwingli. In taking Ritschl to be ‘the only begetter of the Aberdeen heresy’, Smith did in fact acknowledge the latter’s pivotal role in making him see his native Free Church from a historical perspective, pointing out to him the extent to which the traditional view of the Bible with which he had grown up was conditioned by post-Reformation ideas.

‘The leading characteristic of Ritschl’s teaching’, we read in J.S. Black’s and G. W. Chrystal’s biography of Smith, ‘was a sort of shrewd eclecticism which leaned decidedly to Calvinistic orthodoxy’. 51 The lack of quotation marks might lead us to suppose that this is a general verdict on the part of the authors, but in fact it appears to be merely the paraphrase of a statement made by Smith in a letter to his father, namely that Ritschl seemed ‘to lean most to

49 W. R. Smith, *Lectures and Essays* (as above, n. 41), 123. The text in question is stated to date from January 1869.
50 See Otto Ritschl (as above, n. 30), Vol. I, 314.
51 Black and Chrystal (as above, n. 12), 111.
the Calvinistic doctrine’ in the specific question of the assurance of faith’.\(^5\)

In fact, Ritschl held rather strong reservations against Calvinism, as may be seen from a letter which he sent Smith on 24 January 1871, acknowledging the printed version of Smith’s inaugural lecture and a sample translation of his book on the doctrine of atonement:\(^5\)

> As I return the enclosed sheet, I am most grateful to you for your efforts on behalf of my book and give you credit for the high degree of pastoral wisdom which has guided you in the selection of the sample for your public. Well, it takes bacon to catch mice, as the proverb has it, and the passage does indeed sound as if I were a confirmed Calvinist. [. . .] Moreover I have to thank you specifically for your lecture which so skilfully uses Luther’s original practical conception of the Word of God to establish the historical view of the biblical books. Melanchthon and Calvin invalidated this conclusion only too soon by their doctrinaire theoretical interpretation of the Word of God.

This theological difference between Luther and Zwingli on the one hand, and Melanchthon and Calvin on the other hand, is also mentioned in another letter of Ritschel dated 20 February 1878:\(^5\)

> From the *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* (Journal of Church History) you may have seen that I have tackled a history of Pietism and that I am inclined to regard this continuation of the German Lutheran and Zwinglian Churches as a branch of foreign Calvinism. I have been busy pursuing the matter further ever since the New Year, with some interruptions due to lack of literature, and I have studied the writings of Gisbert Voetius, with admiration and yet not without astonishment at the consequences of Calvinism which are officially called praecisitas or Puritanism. To you this phenomenon will be less alien, but this legalism, which always draws on the example of the primitive Church, is bound up with that theological legalism—hostile towards you—which regards the view of the Old Testament which prevailed in the primitive Church and in St. Paul as eternally binding, just because it prevailed in the primitive Church. By basing yourself on the precedent of Luther and Zwingli

\(^{52}\) See above, n. 31.

\(^{53}\) CUL Add. Mss. 7449.

\(^{54}\) CUL Add. Mss. 7449.
you are no longer Calvinist in that respect, and I am afraid you will be judged accordingly. Well, you won’t be burnt, and as to the rest Deus providebit [God will take care].

Obviously, Ritschl was convinced that it was the pietistic legacy of the Free Church which was at the root of Smith’s persecution. In yet another letter dated 22 April 1879, he made no secret of his disgust at what he took to be the result of his historical research:55

In the Netherlands, Pietism is a modification of Calvinism which was brought about by the fact that the majority of the Dutch people resisted Calvinism, when they received it as an import from the French provinces in the south in the wake of their liberation from Spanish rule. In order to enforce Calvinism in spite of the Lutheran and Zwinglian inclinations of the German section of the population, the strict representatives of Calvinism gather in conventicles and adopt a type of piety which is actually Catholic, namely intercourse with the Lord Jesus as bridegroom of the soul. [. . .] I trust you won’t take it amiss if I confess that my affection for Calvinism as a system has not been enhanced by these researches, particularly since I have to say that Pietism—which is really Calvinism impregnated with Catholic devotion—has also poured into the Lutheran Church and produced all that obscurity which has spread over the state of our Church the for the past 60 years.

At this point of his argument, Ritschl felt free to point out the bearing of all this on Smith’s own case:

You, too, suffer because of that which is un-Protestant in Calvinism. For the combination of Lutheranism and certain disciplinary and constitutional standards of the Primitive Church (which is what Calvinism consists of) curiously attracts other most relative elements of the Primitive Church: For just because the scribal learning of a man like Paul was Jewish, this phenomenon of the Primitive Church is likewise regarded as eternally obligatory in Calvinism, and this is why you are barred from understanding the Pentateuch in any way which is different

55 Ibid.
from that in which it appeared to Paul. But the Primitive Church is the ideal of reform at the level of Catholicism, and it is the advantage of Luther over Calvin that he overruled that standard.

As Smith’s letters to Ritschl appear to be no longer extant, we do not know his immediate reaction to these assertions. However, this loss is compensated for to some extent by Smith’s letters to Ludwig Diestel. Born in 1825, Diestel had studied theology in his native Königsberg as well as in Berlin and Bonn. In 1851 he had gained a second doctorate from the University of Bonn, where Albrecht Ritschl had become a close friend. Having been appointed Professor at Bonn in 1858, he moved to Greifswald in 1862 and to Jena in 1867, meeting Smith in the summer of 1872, shortly before moving to what was to become the final stage of his career, Tübingen. Being a close friend of Ritschl and a staunch defender of critical freedom, Diestel had no problem in gaining Smith’s affection and was consequently supplied with offprints of the latter’s academic writing. The following letter written by Diestel in the autumn of 1874 is characteristic of the amicable tone of their correspondence:56

Dear Colleague!

I was most delighted at your sending me your lecture on “The place of theology in the work and growth of the Church”. I thank you for it not only as a token of your friendly disposition towards your German colleagues, but especially because of its most excellent contents. [. . .] I do hope you, too, will soon come and see our beautiful Tübingen! You will be most welcome to all of us.

To this cordial acknowledgement, coupled with the offer to publish a German version of his paper, Smith replied almost instantly and in kind:57

My Dear Professor Diestel

Your very cordial letter was most gratifying to me, both as a proof of your friendship which I highly esteem, and from the satisfaction it gave me to have your approbation of the line of thought which I set before our students in my address. [. . .]

I was greatly delighted to hear that your life & work at Tübingen

56 Ibid.
57 Tübingen, University Library (Md 842–136).
quite come up to your hopes. I should like much to visit you there & perhaps may effect this when I next go abroad. I saw our friend Ritschl in the summer. His book was then rather pressing on his mind. He seemed to fear that it would not find the right reception. I am very glad that you have a better account to give. With us he already enjoys a great name, tho’ here too Dilettanti find his writings too hard to read.

Are you as little a traveller as Ritschl? Shall we not hope to see you here? Aberdeen would in many ways repay a visit. It is the gate to the most striking part of the Highlands and has many other points of interest. And you would be warmly welcomed both here and elsewhere.

I ought to close with telling something of my own work. I have not many students but I have always a fair number of men of really good quality & I think that scientific theology is making way among us.

With kindest regards
Believe me Ever yours
Wm Robertson Smith

As was to be expected, Smith also kept Diestel informed of the ups and downs in his fight for critical freedom:  

My Dear Professor Diestel

I have from time to time sent you newspapers containing some details of the attacks to which I have recently been subjected in our Church courts. I fear they are not wholly intelligible to one who is a stranger to our Church law but you will at least have gathered that a very fierce storm has been raging & that the reactionary party have at all events gained a temporary victory. It is true that their victory is not really so significant as it appears to be at first sight. [. . .] All the rising men of the Church & especially all the younger theological professors were on my side; so one has friends strong enough to give good hopes of the ultimate issue. [. . .]

In his response, Diestel sympathized with Smith in his plight, expressing his conviction that things would be even worse in Germany: ‘I think three out of four of our professors would have to go if they had to face a German synod in the same way as you have to’.  

58 Letter dated 12 July 1877.
undaunted, and in January 1878 enlisted his colleague’s help for the next strategic move in his campaign:  

Dear Professor Diestel

The process against me has at length after innumerable delays almost taken shape & I shall have to give in my answer to the libel in a few days. One of my arguments must be that the Reformers, who established the supreme authority of the Scriptures in the Protestant Churches, were themselves not concerned to deny the possibility of Errors in the Bible.

Now I find in your Geschichte des A.T. p. 234 the statement that according to Zwingli “historische Irrthümer in d. Schrift sind v. Gott gewollt in pädag. Weisheit” [historical errors in the Scripture are willed by God in his pedagogical wisdom].

You do not cite the relevant passages & I have not been able to find them. Nor have I access to the work of your “Gewährsmann” [source] Spörri. It would be a great favour if you could send me as quickly as possible (for my answer must be in print within a fortnight) the relevant references. [. . .]

I have some hope of carrying through to victory my battle for Protestant freedom; but every engine has been used to prejudice the minds & excite the passions of the ignorant in the Church & especially of ministers & laymen from the Highlands who in our Church are a quite peculiar & wholly conservative or retrogressive body.

Yours very truly

W Robertson Smith

As usual, Diestel wrote back immediately and supplied the references which Smith had sought. To further the cause of his friend, he even offered to publish an article in the Protestantische Kirchenzeitung, and to facilitate this task Smith wrote what is probably the longest of his letters which are still extant, giving a detailed and astonishingly dispassionate account of his case extending over some 15 pages.  

In it, he started from the assumption that ‘such a question as that which is now under discussion affects almost all Scotch Presbyterians; & practically a victory for critical freedom in the Free Church will prevent the same battle from being fought over again in

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60 Letter dated 16 January 1878 (Tübingen, University Library, Md 842–136.
61 Letter dated 17 June 1878.
either of the other denominations’. Offering an historical interpretation of the situation, Smith cheerfully admitted that the Free Church of Scotland had ‘generally been regarded as dogmatically the most conservative body in Scotland’, maintaining, however, that it was far less absolutely a reproduction of the Church of the 17th century than its authors supposed. The reaction against moderatism wh. in a way highly characteristic of our country formulated itself as a conservative reaction was in reality largely influenced by so-called English Evangelicalism—i.e. by English Pietism of a somewhat modern type. [. . .] At first I had only friends who thought it right to leave room for opinions they did not hold. Now I have partisans for my views & in particular there is a widespread feeling that the Church must take a new departure by going back, on the whole doctrine of the Word of God, from 17th cent. dogmatism & 18th cent. pietistic supernaturalism to the Reformation position.

No doubt Ritschl would have agreed wholeheartedly. Diestel’s article, which was mainly based on Smith’s account, duly appeared in the Protestantische Literaturzeitung the following month. Its author, however, did not live to see the outcome of the struggle, passing away on 15 May 1879, almost exactly one year before Smith practically won his case by being merely admonished, and almost exactly two years before he was finally deprived of his chair. For Smith, this turn of events rather widened the gulf which since his student days in Germany had opened between his own understanding of Christianity and that of the more conservative and pietistically-minded ranks of his Church. However, it also appears to have loosened the bond between Smith and the only begetter of the Aberdeen heresy, for although Ritschl died as late as 1889, there appear to be no letters from him to Smith after December 1881, when he declined Smith’s offer to contribute an article on Lutheranism to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In a way, it might be argued that just as Ritschl’s interpretation of Pietism as an aberration had estranged Smith from his own Church with its strong Pietistic background, so Ritschl’s insistence on theology being possible only in connection with a church (as distinct from a sect) ultimately led to a parting of the ways with Smith.

63 Letter dated 21 December 1881 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 609).
Fortunately, Smith’s withdrawal from theology pure and simple did not end his link with Tübingen, as his growing interest in oriental studies and work as joint editor of the Encyclopaedia Britannica led to extensive contacts with the Arabic scholar Albert Socin (1844–1887) and the oriental historian Alfred von Gutschmid (1831–1887), who had both been appointed professors at the University of Tübingen in 1876 and 1877 respectively. This oriental link became even more significant, when in the autumn of 1882 Smith was told that he might apply for the Lord Almoner’s Professorship in Arabic which had become vacant on the death of Edward Henry Palmer. A letter from William Wright, who knew Smith from his work on the Old Testament Revision Committee, appears to contain the earliest reference to this exciting possibility.\(^6\)

Palmer is, I fear, gone. Today’s “Times” leaves little doubt on that point. God rest his soul. Poor little man, it was an awful death.

Of course some time will elapse before his place can be filled. I don’t suppose that will be done before the New Year. It wd. give me the greatest satisfaction if I cd. see you and Keith Falconer established beside me as Professor and Lecturer. Bensly is a thoroughly sound man in Syriac—he’s Arabic is not much—but he is horribly slow & unpunctual.

But how can we set about the matter? I think I must really talk the thing over confidentially with Aldis Wright.

You see, the Lord Almoner’s Chair is not in the gift of the University, but of the Lord Almoner for the time being. Even the Commissioners have not dared to touch this piece of private (Royal) patronage. Therefore, as the University has no control over the appointment, they did not grant any increase of stipend, etc. The endowments of the Chair stand: £ 40—certain dues (nearly £ 10, I believe) + fees, if any.

Now, the late Lord Alm. having been gathered by Providence to his fathers, a new man has just been appointed, viz. the Rev. Lord Alwyn Compton, Dean of Worcester. He may give it, I believe, to my cat Toodles, if he pleases. How is he to be influenced or got at?

Sensible man that he was, Wright mustered his friends and colleagues to provide testimonials, only to be informed that his old friend Theodor Nöldeke had already been approached by another competitor, Stanley Lane-Poole. Wright made no secret of his annoyance, telling Nöldeke by mid-November:\(^5\)

\(^{54}\) Letter dated 28 October 1882 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 857).
\(^{55}\) Letter dated 15 November 1882 (Tübingen, University Library, Md 782 A 5).
My dear Noeldeke,

I cannot understand Poole’s restless anxiety to get Palmer’s chair, unless it be merely for the sake of calling himself Professor. [. . .] I wd like to have Robertson Smith appointed, and he would like to get it, but I hardly know how to draw near the Rev. Lord. If you say anything for Poole at all, say it very mildly, else you may sadly interfere with whatever small chance Smith may have.

Convinced of Smith’s superior merits and eager to please his old friend Wright, Nöldeke lost no time in asking Smith about his intentions:66

My Dear Friend!

Mr. Stanley Lane Poole has approached me in order to possibly receive a recommendation of his achievements in Arabic, with a view to obtaining the professorship of the late Palmer. I have asked Wright for his opinion, and he tells me that he would be much more pleased if you obtained the professorship, which—after the deduction of all dues—is worth only 30 £, but does not entail any duties at all. [Wright says] your chances were but small, as the Lord Almoner who bestows it is High Church. Still, I would not like do to the least that would reduce your chances. For this reason I would like to ask you 1) whether you apply or intend to apply at all (in which case you would of course obtain from me every recommendation, should it be sought), 2) if it is all right by you if I tell St. L.-P. that I would recommend him only in case you are not a competitor, as you were closer to me personally. Or is he perhaps not to know that you apply if you do? Please do respond a.s.a.p.!

Kind regards, Th Nöldeke

While the response to this request is no longer extant, the glowing testimonial which Nöldeke supplied shortly afterwards leaves no doubt about the resolution and seriousness with which Smith sought support for his application. Wright’s relief is manifest in a letter which he sent Nöldeke before the end of the month:67

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66 Letter from Nöldeke to Smith, dated 17 November 1882 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 509).

67 Letter dated 26 November 1882 (Tübingen, University Library, Md 782 A 5).
My dear Noeldeke,

Thanks for your kind letter on behalf of R. S. I shall do with it the best I can; but I fear without result, as I am not likely to be consulted by the Lord Almoner. He is a strictly orthodox Highchurchman, the very antipode in every way of R. S. For the rest, the thing is as I told you: the said chair has no duties, and a salary of only £40 per an. Palmer’s predecessor, Preston, lived, and still lives, in Madeira; and for the last two years of his life Palmer himself resided in London & never came near us. My only hope is that Poole may not get it, as he is personally a very conceited, unamiable individual.

Further supportive testimonials arrived in quick succession, but Smith remained pessimistic, telling his Tübingen colleague Albert Socin on Christmas Day 1882:68

I have still to thank you for your kind testimonial. My testimonials have been very well received in Cambridge; but I fear they will have no effect on the Lord Almoner, who seems resolved not to consult the Cambridge men “vom Fach”.

In a letter to Paul de Lagarde, written two days later, Smith expressed himself even more negatively:69

I have not yet any formal answer to my application for the Cambridge [professorship] but am told by W. Wright that tho’ the Cambridge philologists seem to be strong for me the Lord Almoner refuses to consult them & will certainly not have me.

Thus it must have been with some apprehension that Smith opened the following letter from the Lord Almoner which he received on New Year’s day 1883:70

Dear Mr. Robertson Smith,

You are no doubt aware that the Professorship recently held by Mr. Palmer, and which it is now my duty to fill up has a very small stipend

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68 Letter dated 25 December 1882 (Tübingen, University Library).
70 Letter dated 30 December 1883 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 160).
and no duties attached to it. [. . .] As regards the latter point, I cannot think it satisfactory that the Lord Almoner’s Reader at Cambridge should be in a position to do—if he likes—nothing there: though of course he cannot be expected to do much for £50. I propose therefore to impose upon him, in the terms of his appointment, the duty of giving at least one public lecture every year within the University on some Arabic classical author: or on Arabic literature generally: or on some subject connected with it, such as the Arabic language, grammatically or philologically considered, the Geography, History or Natural History of Arabia. I trouble you with all these details, because I have determined after much consideration to offer you this post.

One of the very first letters of congratulation came from Theodor Nöldeke who was delighted at this result which Wright had represented to him as most unlikely.71 On the same day, Wright chose to lift at least a corner of the veil which enshrouded the Lord Almoner’s mysterious change of mind.72

My dear Noeldeke,

For Rob. Smith’s apptment we may, I think, be as thankful to Dr Littledale as to anybody. This, however, is private information, and not to be made public.

But what prompted the Reverend Dr. Richard Frederick Littledale (1833–1890) to exercise his influence in the way he did? In fairness to him it should be stated that he was not only a notorious controversialist on behalf of the Oxford Movement, but also a man of considerable learning who contributed numerous articles to the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.73 Moreover, despite all theological and ecclesiastical differences, he appears to have resembled Smith not only in his appreciation of beautiful pictures, but also because he—just like Smith—is said to have had ‘a keen and intense sense of humour, a power of repartee, and amusing way of putting things’. Born in Dublin in 1833, Littledale was said to combine ‘the very truest, largest-hearted charity’ with ‘genuine Hibernian wit’. We get a glimpse

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71 Letter dated 5 January 1883 (CUL Add. Mss. 7449 D 510).
72 Letter dated 5 January 1883 (Tübingen, University Library, Md 782 A 5).
of what that means when we read in A. H. Sayce’s memoirs that the man who famously translated one of the *Laudi spirituali* by Bianco da Siena into English as ‘Come Down, O Love Divine’ (later set to music by Sir Ralph Vaughan Williams) had lost his first curacy when during a celebration on the Eve of St. Lawrence’s day he had stolen into the empty church and mischievously replaced a gloomy hymn which had been specially composed for the occasion by a ditty of his own, beginning “Twas the night before Larry was stretched.” Nevertheless, we would probably do Littledale an injustice if we attributed his intervention on behalf of Smith to what Sayce chose to call ‘an Irishman’s versatility and sense of humour’. As the Lord Almoner’s decision was very much in line with the preferences of the specialists, Littledale may well have been motivated by his customarily pragmatic, no-nonsense approach to questions of scholarship. ‘He had a great horror of stupidity’, remarked one of those who knew him, ‘and always said “stupidity made more mischief in the world than wickedness.”’ On top of that, however, we should not neglect the human factor either, for Littledale was at the same time—William Wright’s brother-in-law. Just how much Smith came to know about what had been going on we shall never learn, but it is probably significant that Smith’s affection for William Wright and his wife Emily, née Littledale, remained unswerving to the end. Some ten weeks after her husband had died on 22 May 1889, a grateful Emily Wright told Theodor Nöldeke,

> You will not require to be told that in all our time of anxiety and sorrow Robertson Smith has been the kindest, truest most untiring friend to me & my sister. I do not know what we should have done without his aid.

Some two weeks after Smith himself had died on 31 March 1894, Emily Wright told their common friend M. J. de Goeje:

> The University has had a grievous loss & we shall never cease to miss him. Ever since Willie died no good son cd have done more or been more affectionate to me & my sister.

On New Year’s Day 1883, however, these events were still in the distant future,

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75 Letter dated 4 August 1889 (Tübingen, University Library, Md 782 A 5).
76 Letter dated 17 April 1894 (Leiden, University Library, BPL 2389).
and an overjoyed Smith lost no time in telling his old teacher of Arabic, Paul de Lagarde, the splendid news:  

Dear Prof. Lagarde

After all, I am to have the chair in Cambridge. The Lord Almoner offers me it today “after much consideration”. Thanks once more for your share in this result both by your testimonial & by your constant help. And now as they say in Egypt

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W. R. Smith

In thus switching from English to Arabic, moving from Scotland to Cambridge, and swapping theology for social anthropology, Smith may be said to have completed the transition indicated by the title of this paper, ‘From Pietism to Totemism’. We in turn may feel—to use the concluding words of Smith’s opening lecture on The Religion of the Semites—‘that we have reached a point of rest at which both speaker and hearers will be glad to make a pause’.  

Universität Tübingen

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77 Postcard dated 1 January 1883 (as above, n. 69).

78 I would like to thank Mrs. Astrid Hess; the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; University of Aberdeen, Library and Historic Collections; Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden; Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen and Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen for their permission to quote from unpublished material in their possession.—For a full account of previous and subsequent events in the life of William Robertson Smith, I may be allowed to refer the reader to my forthcoming biography (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).
Wellhausen and Robertson Smith as Sociologists of early Arabia and ancient Israel

J.W. Rogerson

‘Your book will long be influential’. With these words in a letter to his friend William Robertson Smith of 2 September 1885 Julius Wellhausen praised Smith’s book *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, whose proofs he had received.¹ ‘In my opinion’, continued Wellhausen, ‘it is by far the best thing you have done. Naturally you could work on this material for ever. The harvest is great’. Wellhausen could scarcely know how this prophecy would be fulfilled and although, as we shall see, Wellhausen became increasingly critical of *Kinship and Marriage*, Smith’s book had considerable influence on later British social anthropology. When the doyen of British social anthropology Edward Evans-Pritchard conducted his field work in the 1930s in Libya and the Sudan, Smith’s book, as Evans-Pritchard later told his colleagues and students, played an important role.² In particular, Evans-Pritchard developed from *Kinship and Marriage* a theory of segmentation, although Smith did not use this term himself, and Evans-Pritchard’s classical book *The Nuer* (1940) has been described as ‘the most thorough ethnographic application of segmentary theory’.³ The fact that Smith’s book became so influential is remarkable, given that Smith’s belief that Matriarchy and Totemism had once existed universally among the Semites is not only regarded as completely wrong today, but was not widely accepted in the nineteenth century either, and certainly not by Wellhausen. But, as I shall point out later, Robertson Smith recognised the importance of trying to identify the mechanisms that had shaped societies, and he therefore rightly received recognition for being a pioneer in this area of

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¹ A revised version of a lecture given in German at the Wellhausen Congress, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena in November 2006. I am grateful to my niece Ellie Fulford for assistance in preparing this English version. Wellhausen’s letters to Smith are in the Cambridge University Library, ADD 7449. The English translations are my own.


social anthropology. There is also an interesting German connection because Smith based his view of early Arabian social organisation on the genealogical tables of the Göttingen Arabist and pupil of Heinrich Ewald, Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, who was also a colleague of Wellhausen.

Wellhausen not only praised Smith’s book *Kinship and Marriage*. When agreeing to look through the proofs, he admitted in a letter dated 26 August that ‘I have never before read the Arabic texts from this particular standpoint’ and he continued, ‘I’m not sure that I shall be able to be much help’. In the event, from this time onwards Wellhausen did read the Arabic texts from this viewpoint, he found much of value in the approach, and in the second edition of his book *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* he criticised and corrected some of what Smith had written.

Before I discuss this, I want to point out that already in his dissertation of 1870 Wellhausen had used contemporary accounts of life in Arabia in order to explain Old Testament genealogies. Wellhausen’s *De gentibus et familiis judaeis quae 1. Chr. 2.4 enumerantur* concerned itself with the genealogy of the family of Judah in 1 Chronicles 2:4–41. In his discussion, Wellhausen expressed the opinion that although the genealogy depended on traditions from pre-exilic times, the genealogy in its present form was written after the exile. This conclusion was later used in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* to support the thesis first proposed by de Wette in 1806 that the books of Chronicles were written after the exile. The interesting point for our purposes is that Wellhausen’s treatment of the Old Testament texts was influenced by examples from contemporary Arabia. On page 24, there is a long quotation from W.G. Palgrave’s *Narrative of a Year’s Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia 1862–1863*.

Arab nationality is and always has been based on the division of families and clans. These clans were soon, by the nature of the land itself, divided each and every one into two branches, co-relative indeed, but of unequal size or importance. The greater section remained as townsmen or peasants in the districts best susceptible of culture and permanent occupation, where they still kept up much of their original clannish denominations and forms, though often blended and even at times obliterated by the fusion inseparable from civil and social organisation. The other and lesser portion devoted themselves to a pastoral life. They too retained their original clannish and family

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4 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin, 1927), 212–14
demarcations, but unsoftened by civilisation and unblended by the links of close-drawn society; so that in this point they have continued to be the faithful depositories of primeval Arab tradition and constitute a sort of standard rule for the whole nation. Hence when genealogical doubts and questions of descent arise, as they often do among the fixed inhabitants, recourse is often had to the neighbouring Bedouins for a decision unattainable in the complicated records of town life.\(^5\)

This example, according to which Arabic families were divided into two parts, was used by Wellhausen to explain the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2. Of the two sons of Hezron, Jerachmeel and Caleb, Jerachmeel corresponded to the people who lived as city dwellers, with Caleb corresponding to the pastoralists. This means that already as a young man, Wellhausen had taken examples from contemporary Arabia in order to explain the sociology and history of ancient Israel. His later ‘going over from the Old Testament to the Arabs’ (Uebergang vom Alten Testament zu den Arabern) as he famously described this step in 1882 at the beginning of his translation of al-Wâkidi’s Kitab alMaghazi (the book of the raids of the Prophet Muhammad), was not without precedent. His continuation ‘I have no doubt that the original organisation with which the Hebrews entered history can be illuminated through a comparison with Arabian antiquity’ corresponded to the opinion that he had expressed in his dissertation twelve years earlier.\(^6\) It is also possible to note in the dissertation the conviction which later became central to Wellhausen’s view of the origins of Islam in Medina. This was that the combination of the circumscribed conditions of life in the city and the consciousness of once having been a nomadic people resulted in Medina in the chaos of never-ending blood feuds that Muhammad was able to bring to an end by his view of the teaching of Allah.\(^7\)

I now come to discuss Wellhausen’s disagreements with Smith’s *Kinship and Marriage* in the two editions of his Reste Arabischen Heidentums. In the first edition, Smith was quoted at least fifteen times almost always positively. Only in one particular was Wellhausen unable to agree with his friend, and this was in connection with Smith’s belief that Totemism was once practised by the Arabs, and that the names of Arabian tribes were animal names, the subject


\(^7\) J. Wellhausen, *Das Arabische Reich und sein Sturz* (Berlin, 1902), 4.
of chapter 7 of *Kinship and Marriage*. ‘W.R. Smith has tried to prove that among the Arabs the so called Totemism once existed’, wrote Wellhausen, ‘the custom known particularly from the Indians that a tribe believes a wolf to be its divine ancestor, calls itself wolf and sees all wolves as their blood relatives. However I agree with Nöldeke that he has not succeeded in proving this’. Arab tribal names are names of individuals and applied from individuals to the tribes. There are some animal names among them . . . but these are incidental, and do not amount to a consistent system. If Wellhausen could not accept Smith’s theory of Totemism, he believed that Smith had given the correct explanation for the origin and importance of female deities. The dualism of male and female gods had nothing to do with the processes of conception and birth. ‘Gods and goddesses stand next to each other, self contained and quite unrelated. They never constitute a pair, as W.R. Smith has correctly emphasised, in particular by pointing out that gods are much older than the institution of marriage’. The importance of goddesses was that they were bound up with the mysterious forces of nature and as a result of this with the idea of authority. Once more, Wellhausen could mention and praise his friend. ‘In addition, W.R. Smith has shown convincingly that the terms authority and motherhood lie close together. The mother holds the family together. The ruler of the stars who orders their course is called the mother of the stars, as we have seen. There are therefore two explanations of how divinity can be thought of in female terms’.

Before I compare the second edition of *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* with the first, I shall, for chronological reasons, mention Wellhausen’s article ‘Die Ehe bei den Arabern’ which he published in 1893 and described as ‘a gleaning from the harvest which others, particularly W.R. Smith, have reaped’. In this article, Wellhausen both agreed and disagreed with Smith. In particular, Wellhausen criticised Smith’s view that in both ancient Israel and early Arabia, marriage was a custom in which the man became a member of his wife’s family, and that the Arabic phrase *bana ‘alaiha* (he built a tent over his wife) was equivalent to the Hebrew *ba ‘eleiha* (he went in to her), meaning that the marriage tent

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8 Wellhausen was referring to the long review of *Kinship and Marriage* by Th. Nöldeke in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 40 (1886), 148–87.
10 *Reste*, 179.
11 *Reste*, 180.
belonged to the wife and not to the husband. Wellhausen also rejected Smith’s attempt to derive so-called Levirate marriage from an original situation of polyandry. Over against Smith’s view that there had once been a matriarchal system in Semitic societies, Wellhausen preferred the term ‘Metrarchie’ and meant by this word not a matriachate, but simply the recognition of the importance of the mother and her relatives in matters of descent.

The first edition of Reste Arabischen Heidentums appeared in 1887. When Wellhausen published the second edition ten years later, Smith was dead, a fact that Wellhausen commented on with evident sadness in the preface to his book Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte which was published in 1894. ‘A reader on whom I had counted, closed his eyes just as the first pages of my book were being printed. William Robertson Smith was freed from his long and painful sufferings on Saturday 31 March this year’. The death of his friend gave Wellhausen the freedom to criticise Smith’s work more severely than perhaps would have been the case if Smith had still been alive. Wellhausen omitted several references to Smith that had been in the first edition, re-wrote others as footnotes, and criticised Smith in other cases. The second edition assumed that it was no longer necessary to refute the Totemism theory and therefore omitted all reference to it. Also the paragraphs about male and female deities was considerably revised and the complimentary references to Smith were omitted. On page 188 footnote 1, Wellhausen remarked that Smith had not correctly understood a narrative about blood feud between the Hodhalites and the Yemenites, and he continued ‘W.R. Smith has too quickly drawn the conclusion from this example that its proper application was when a man was found slain; then the people of the place had to swear that they were not the murderers, exactly as in Deuteronomy 21. In fact in Islam, it was the rule that the state paid the blood money for someone whose murderer was unknown and that this came out of the official purse’. Wellhausen was critical not only

14 ‘Die Ehe’, 461.
15 ‘Die Ehe, 474.
16 J. Wellhausen, Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte (Berlin: Reimer, 1894), vi.
of *Kinship and Marriage* but also of Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* whose second edition Smith had prepared shortly before his death in 1894. For example, Wellhausen criticised Smith’s description of the ceremony in ‘Arāfa and Muzdalifā in connection with the pilgrimage to Mecca.19 The issue was whether or not ‘Arāfa, a mountain to the east of Mecca was reckoned to be part of the sacred area. Smith argued that it was not. Wellhausen appealed to ancient authorities to show that it was.

Smith had stimulated Wellhausen to think about the sociology of the Arabs even though Wellhausen had already used Arabian examples in his dissertation in order to understand Old Testament genealogies. As soon as he began to concentrate upon these matters, Wellhausen felt himself obliged to criticise and to correct Smith, especially after Smith’s death. The basic difference between them was that Wellhausen concentrated upon details while Smith, who was by no means indifferent to details, was trying to give sociological explanations to the material he was studying. The reason for his interest in Totemism was that he saw in it an explanation for the mechanisms that gave social and religious cohesion to exogamous groups. Again, his efforts to demonstrate the existence of a matriarchal system that had preceded the patriarchal system among the Semites were grounded in an attempt to explain things sociologically. There were practices and references in the Old Testament and in the Arabic texts that did not appear to fit the pattern of descent in the male line. Genesis 2: 24 has already been mentioned. Given that writers such as J.J. Bachofen, Smith’s friend J.F. McLennan and the Dutch scholar G.A. Wilken had argued for the priority of matriarchal systems over patriarchal ones, Smith was not out of line with the intellectual currents of his time.20 Even Nöldeke in his review of *Kinship and Marriage* had admitted that the existence of the matriarchate among the Semites at some time in their history could not be doubted.21 Smith thus used his brilliant intellect to try to solve the anomalies that he found in the texts by ascribing them to relics of a once all-pervasive matriarchal system among the Semites. He had genuine sociological instincts that were lacking in his great German colleague.

I come now briefly to the matter of the sociology of ancient Israel. Smith wrote very little about the origins of the Israelites, Wellhausen a little more.

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21 Th. Nöldeke, in *ZDMG*, 40, 149.
What one finds in both is, in my opinion, simplistic in comparison with what they had written about Arabian tribes and genealogies. Consider these quotations from Welhausen’s *Medina vor dem Islam*:

Several families (Sippen) make up a clan (Geschlecht), several clans a group (Gruppe), and several groups form a tribe. Arabic terminology in these matters is in no way precise. The size of the units in the subdivisions varies at each level. There is no measurement and no number that is necessary to define a group or a clan. Fragmentation and filiation can go even further or they can cease. Large clans can divide into smaller parts and then into families. A small clan, on the other hand can constitute a single *Dār* (household). . .

The genealogy is organised on the principle of kinship, but because there can be disruptions of the kinship principle, which produce new relationships after older ones have been dissolved, the new situations are immediately represented in terms of kinship, because all relationships are expressed in terms of blood relationships. In this way old and new, past and present are united together on one level. . . Genealogies are therefore as much history as statistic. . . they cannot be understood without an historical commentary. Unfortunately, that commentary is only very partially available to us.  

Given the sophistication of his handling of this material Wellhausen’s account of Israel’s origins is astonishingly meagre. He believed that the people of Israel had been formed from various groups that were found at the oasis of Kadesh. Where did their unity come from? Wellhausen was not entirely clear about this. He spoke of the war camp, of religion, and of the tie of blood, without describing or analysing any social mechanisms in terms of which they might have operated, and which would have made these suggestions meaningful. It may be that he thought that Moses had acted in a similar way to how he understood Muhammad to have acted, and had established a people on the basis of religion and war.  

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Smith’s account of Israel’s origins was similarly meagre. In *Kinship and Marriage* he described the Hebrews as ‘armed hordes of nomads’ who had emerged from Arabia. Following their conquest of Canaan they had undergone a transition from pastoral to agricultural life and had absorbed a considerable part of the existing population of Canaan. What saved them from losing their identity was the fact that Moses had given them a common faith in Jehovah, a faith that had been forged through Israel’s wars of occupation, and the conviction that Jehovah was in their midst. It was left to the prophets to form this rudimentary faith into the religion of Israel at its best.

For the sake of completeness it must be said that the view of Wellhausen and Robertson Smith that it was possible to utilise descriptions of Arabia in order to reconstruct primitive Semitic religion or the social history of ancient Israel, was incorrect. This view was based upon the assumption that there had once been a Semitic homeland in Arabia from which waves of Semites had from time to time emerged into the surrounding lands, where they came into contact with civilised peoples and interacted with them. Further, there was the view that the Arabic language and Arab peoples living in their desert Semitic homeland had preserved fundamental features of the original Semitic culture. Only so was it possible to use literary sources from the 7th and 8th centuries CE in order to illumine the social organisation of ancient Israel from the 12th century BCE, or genealogies such as that discussed by Welhausen in his doctoral dissertation.

Already during the lifetime of Robertson Smith and Wellhausen there was a challenge to the idea of an Arabian ‘homeland’ which had preserved unaltered the elements of primitive Semitic religion. In 1906 the Assyriologist Hugo Winckler criticised the school ‘which found its salvation in the Bedouin theory’ and he argued that it was necessary to understand the sociology and religion of ancient Israel in the light of the great civilisations of Babylon and Assyria. What existed in the Arab lands before the coming of Islam was not a form of primitive Semitic religion but the degenerated relics of the urban culture of Babylon and Assyria. Although the general opinion today

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24 *Kinship*, 209.
25 *Kinship*, 252.
is that the ‘pan-Babylonians’ went too far in the claims that they made for the importance of ancient Mesopotamia, modern Old Testament scholarship pays much more attention to ancient Assyria and Babylon than it does to ancient Arabia, perhaps wrongly. Researchers such as Werner Caskel, Joseph Henninger, Walter Dostal and Francesco Gabrielli have shown that the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and of nomadism and the Bedouin is far more complex than Wellhausen or Robertson Smith could have imagined. The idea of a ‘homeland’ in the Arabian desert from which the Semites originated, has been abandoned, as well as the idea that Arabic offers direct access to proto-Semitic.

In modern Social Anthropology the point is made that genealogies have little to do with reality and that they should be regarded as ‘constructed meanings’ which simplify social groupings and processes. The idea that a society is constituted by ‘blood’ is likewise rejected. Under the heading of ‘practical kinship’ it is acknowledged that groups and societies are bound together by a whole range of different elements, even if their members depend upon genealogies. The connections can be understood as the working together of political, economic and cultic factors. All this indicates that while Robertson Smith and Wellhausen were pioneers in their day, the discipline has moved on considerably since then. However, it is also fair to say that the discipline would not be where it is today without their remarkable pioneering contributions.
In 1911, summarizing recent developments in mythography, the French classical anthropologist Salomon Reinach (1858–1932) remarked that a sufficient epitaph for William Robertson Smith might be ‘genuit Frazerum’. By 1911 enough time had passed since Smith’s death to permit a reasonably dispassionate appraisal of his work, and Reinach was a competent critic of both Smith and Frazer, so I don’t think we can dismiss the phrase as merely an example of the French fondness for epigram. We never expect an epigram to tell the whole truth, but instead to illuminate its subject in an unexpected way, which I hope to show that it does. I shall argue that Reinach may have spoken truer than he knew.

There can be no doubt that Smith did indeed beget Frazer in the figurative sense as an anthropologist—I am, of course, using ‘anthropologist’ as it was understood in Smith and Frazer’s day—in that he initiated Frazer into a field about which the latter knew very little and acted as his mentor until, it might be argued, the pupil overtook the master. As long as Smith lived, they remained the closest of friends, seeing one another often and going for long walks and talks. When Smith’s health broke down early in 1890 from the tuberculosis that would kill him four years later, Frazer visited him frequently, assisted him in every way he could, and after his death helped J. S. Black see the revised edition of *The Religion of the Semites* through the press. All that is either well known or obvious. But what I want try to delineate is what Smith may have meant to Frazer imaginatively and psychologically, which means that I shall describe some important moments in that relationship, and then engage in some psychological speculation, with all the difficulties that implies.

At this point I must insert a minimum of what is now fashionably called ‘back-story’. Smith, in the articles ‘Angel’ and ‘Bible’ in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, presented an epitome of a century of German

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1 Salomon Reinach, ‘The Growth of Mythological Study’, *Quarterly Review* 215 (October 1911), 423–41; ‘genuit Frazerum’ occurs on p. 438. The phrase would have greater force if we knew whether Reinach actually knew Smith; he certainly knew Frazer, at least as a correspondent.
Higher Criticism, thereby scandalizing his co-religionists in the Free Church of Scotland, most of whom had barely heard of biblical criticism, and knew only that they didn’t like it. Inevitably, some of those co-religionists preferred charges against him in what became the last serious heresy trials in Great Britain. I shall skip over the tortuous business of the trials themselves and Smith’s resultant notoriety, and pick up the narrative with his appointment as Lord Almoner’s reader in Arabic at Cambridge. As such, Smith was made a member of Trinity College in October 1883, and arrived in Cambridge at Christmas of that year. Happily, we have a full and detailed description by Frazer of his first meeting with Smith and its consequences, an account that is not only comprehensive but extraordinarily revealing. The account exists because in 1897, three years after Smith’s death, a friend, John F. White, wished to compose an appreciation of Smith and accordingly wrote to Frazer, among others, for information and reminiscences. Frazer was neither an introspective man nor one at all given to writing about his feelings, but White happened to approach him at a moment when he was close to exhaustion, having just seen the work of fourteen years (the six quarto volumes of Pausanias’s Description of Greece) through the press. It may well have been authorial fatigue that caused him to let down his defences somewhat, but more importantly it must have been the force of the still poignant memory of his friend. Whatever it was, and most uncharacteristically, on 15 December 1897 Frazer responded at extraordinary length, in what is by far the longest we have of the several thousand of his extant letters. There are of course reminiscences of Smith by various hands, but none that I know has the immediacy of Frazer’s. So even though we have no matching account from Smith’s side, in this case something is a great deal better than nothing.

Before I offer extracts from this remarkable source, we need context. We must have something more about the party of the second part, James George Frazer, and not merely how he came to be at Trinity but, more importantly, how he came to be open to a life-changing experience such as his encounter with Smith would prove to be. Born in Glasgow in 1854 (that is, nearly eight years after Smith) the eldest son of Daniel Frazer, a well-known druggist (Frazer & Green, Buchanan Street), from his earliest days James George

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showed outstanding academic ability. He matriculated in the University of Glasgow in November 1869, two months shy of his sixteenth birthday, and there amassed a brilliant record. Nonetheless, he knew when he graduated in 1874 that his academic preparation was incomplete. Having chosen classics as his subject, his path lay south, to an English university. He thought of competing for the Snell Exhibition, which had sent a stream of bright young Scotsmen, from Adam Smith to Andrew Lang, to Balliol College. His father, who had by this time overcome his disappointment at his son’s lack of interest in joining the business, had different ideas. To Daniel Frazer, a stalwart of the Free Church, Balliol meant Oxford, and Oxford meant High Church, and perhaps even a last lingering hint of Newman and Rome from thirty years earlier: ‘fearing to expose me to the contagion he sent me to Cambridge instead’. A friend of Daniel Frazer’s recommended Trinity College, and so the decision was made. Daniel Frazer would probably have died if he knew that he was sending his son to what was then probably the epicentre of rationalism and unbelief in Britain.

At Trinity, the most aristocratic of the Cambridge colleges, the studious young Frazer was certainly one of the ever-present if always small contingent of ‘reading men’. His brilliant showing at Glasgow was repeated when he came second in the classical Tripos in 1878. This in turn led to a six-year college fellowship, which meant that he had the time to continue his already wide reading and to follow new interests when and as they arose, all the while looking for a scholarly project that might make his name in the academic world. During the term of his fellowship he applied for a number of teaching positions, indeed including one at the University of Aberdeen, but fortunately all his vocational forays came to nothing. One foray in the library did come to something, however: sometime during these six years, at the urging of his friend the psychologist James Ward, he read E. B. Tylor’s pioneering *Primitive Culture* (1871), which applied a Darwinian perspective to the domain of human culture. Tylor offered an evolutionary survey of the entire spectrum of social institutions, including those especially sensitive ones—mythology and religion—that passionately preoccupied the educated middle classes of the post-Darwinian generation. *Primitive Culture* must have made a deep

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3 J. G. Frazer, ‘Speech on Receiving the Freedom of the City of Glasgow’, in *Creation and Evolution in Primitive Cosmogonies and Other Pieces* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 120. This essay, along with its sequel ‘Memories of My Parents’ (also in *Creation and Evolution*), together constitute a memoir of sorts and contain most of the information we have about Frazer’s youth.
impression; despite Frazer’s abiding friendship for Smith, a fitting epitaph for Tylor might have been ‘genuit Frazerum’.

In 1884 we have two important events: the 30-year-old Frazer embarked on a significant scholarly enterprise by signing a contract with George Macmillan to prepare a two-volume translation of, and commentary on, the description of Greece composed by the second-century Greek traveller Pausanias. This was definitely not ‘pure’ or disinterested scholarship: on the contrary, the work was intended for the use of the growing number of adventurous tourists who were beginning to make the difficult journey to Athens to see the ruins and peer over the shoulders of the archaeologists into the excavations then taking place all around the city. It’s worth noting that Pausanias, who was (depending in your point of view) either an amateur ethnographer or else just a busybody who loved to poke his nose into odd corners, had a special interest in curious rural customs that had long since been forgotten in Athens, which would later offer Frazer innumerable opportunities for commentary. Taken together, Tylor’s book and Pausanias’s curiosity, along with his friendship with Henry Jackson, vice-master of the college and a keen student of ethnography, suggest that Frazer may not have been quite an anthropological virgin when in January 1884 he met William Robertson Smith in the senior common room at Trinity.

Here, then, we have Frazer’s account from 1897:

When he [Smith] came to Cambridge he joined Trinity and had a very small set of rooms allotted to him in Whewell’s Court. . . I used to see him at dinner in the college hall and in the street for some time before I made his acquaintance. But one evening, I think in January 1884, when I had gone, contrary to my custom, to combination room after dinner he came and sat beside me and entered into conversation.

I think that one subject of our talk that evening was the Arabs in Spain and that, though I knew next to nothing about the subject, I attempted some sort of argument with him, but was immediately beaten down, in the kindest and gentlest way, by his learning, and yielded myself captive at once. I never afterwards, so far as I can remember, attempted to dispute the mastership which he thenceforth exercised over me by his extraordinary union of genius and learning. From that time we went walks together sometimes in the afternoons, and sometimes he asked me to his rooms . . .
Afterwards he moved to larger and better rooms. Here he staid [sic] till he left Trinity for Christ’s College, where he was elected to a fellowship [in 1885]. On selfish grounds I regretted his migration to Christ’s, as it prevented me from seeing him so easily and so often as before.

Smith may have been glad to hear a Scottish voice (later in the letter Frazer remarks that Smith ‘once introduced me as “one of the Scotch contingent” to a great friend of his, the late professor of Arabic, William Wright, himself a Scotchman’), or he may have heard that Frazer shared his own Free Church background; in any event they met and quickly became friends. Smith soon saw that his compatriot was clever and that Pausanias did not occupy all his waking hours. As editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* he was always on the lookout for likely contributors and immediately pressed Frazer into service.

In those days the volumes of the *Britannica* were published one or two at a time, as completed. By 1884 the first seventeen volumes, covering the letters A through O, had already appeared; thus it was that Frazer’s contributions are all on subjects that begin with P and subsequent letters. Frazer continues:

> While he was still living in Whewell’s Court [in 1884] he gratified me very much by asking me to contribute some of the smaller classical articles to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, of which he was then joint editor. My little articles pleased him and he afterwards entrusted me with a more important one, that on Pericles. I was flattered by the trust, but when I came to write I could not satisfy myself and made great efforts to get him to transfer the work to someone else. He did his best to relieve me, even telegraphing (if I remember aright) to a man at a distance to ask him to undertake it, and when all proved fruitless he actually came to my rooms and began writing with his own hand at my dictation or from my notes to oblige me to make a start with it. This may serve to give some faint notion of the endless trouble he had to endure as editor of the *Encyclopaedia*.

It is not excessive to describe this as an account of a courtship—in an intellectual setting to be sure, and between two men, but a courtship for all of that. I’m afraid that I feel compelled to add at this point that this does not mean that either man was what we would today call homosexual. It does mean that same-sex friendships, then as now, and however intellectual their setting or *raison d’être*, often have underlying erotic components that are not
explicitly expressed; furthermore, that likening this one to a courtship does not do violence to Frazer’s narrative, especially because the suggestive language—‘yielding oneself captive’, ‘mastership’—is his own. The letter also makes clear that in terms of their relationship, from the start Smith was the dominant male while the insecure Frazer immediately assumed the passive role conventionally assigned to the woman.

The same long letter (written, it should be remembered, to an acquaintance) continues as he summons up, in an outpouring of emotion, some of the peak moments that he and Smith enjoyed. They went on a walking tour in Scotland in September of that happy first year, 1884:

He loved the mountains, and one of my most vivid recollections of him is his sitting on a hillside looking over the mountains and chanting or rather crooning some of the Hebrew psalms in a sort of rapt ecstatic way. I did not understand them, but I suppose they were some of the verses in which the psalmist speaks of lifting his eyes to the hills. He liked the absolutely bare mountains, with nothing on them but the grass and the heather, better than wooded mountains, which I was then inclined to prefer. We made an expedition in a boat down the loch and spent a night in a shepherd’s cottage. He remarked what a noble life a shepherd’s is. I think he meant that the shepherd lives so much with nature, away from the squalor and vice of cities, and has to endure much hardship in caring for his flock. After returning from our long rambles on the hills we used to have tea (and an exceedingly comfortable tea) at the little inn and then we read light literature (I read French novels, I forget what he read), stretched at ease one of us on the sofa, the other on an easy chair. These were amongst the happiest days I ever spent, and I looked forward to spending similar days with him again. But they never came.

Frazer had never met anyone with whom he had such complete rapport nor would he ever do so later. ‘But they never came’ is the epitaph on a perfect Victorian honeymoon.

There is more. Elizabeth Barrett Browning asked, ‘How much do I love thee?’ Let’s allow Frazer to count the ways. Smith was a brilliant man, but unlike other clever men at Trinity he never used his learning to gain attention or to oppress others with his erudition.4

4 For another view, here is Henry Sidgwick, in his journal, recounting meeting Smith at dinner on 19 February 1885: ‘Met Robertson Smith there: the little man flowed,
As a companion he was perfect, always considerate and kind, always buoyant and cheerful, always in conversation pouring out a seemingly inexhaustible stream of the most interesting conversation. He talked in such a way as to bring out the best talk of others. He was the best listener as well as the best talker I ever knew. I mean that he paid close attention to what was said, and took it in with electric rapidity. I used to feel as if it were almost needless to complete a sentence in speaking with him. He seemed intuitively to anticipate all one meant to say on hearing the first few words. I used to think of him as a fine musical instrument, sensitive in every fibre and responding instantaneously to every touch. . . .

One thing that gave one a special confidence in speaking to him was a feeling that he knew one inside and outside better than one knew oneself, and that though he must have discerned all one’s blemishes and weaknesses he still chose to be a friend. He was almost, if not quite, the only one of my friends with whom I have had this feeling of being known through and through by him. This gave one an assurance that his regard would be unalterable, because there was no depth in one’s nature which he had not explored and knew. With almost all other friends I have felt as if they knew only little bits of my nature and were liable at any moment wholly to misunderstand my words and acts because they did not know the rest of me.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine says that she does not love Heathcliff, she is Heathcliff. What we have here in Frazer’s letter, which I see as an entry in a diary that would otherwise be meant for no other eyes, is the language of romantic passion, of the incorporation of the beloved into oneself, the whole thing shot through with the melancholy of the might-have-been. One can imagine his desperation in those early days, when his wish to please Smith came into conflict with his chronic anxiety and self-doubt over ‘Pericles’. It is fortunate for both of them that in the end he managed to produce the article, after which we hear no more about any writer’s block.

Later in the letter we have another lover’s memory in the form of a charming vignette. One day after Smith had departed for Christ’s, the two of them decided to watch a college boat race. Smith on the bank entertained, domineered, almost as usual’. TCC Add. MS c. 97:25 (30).
in his eager enthusiastic way determined to run... beside the Christ’s boat, his college boat. He started bravely but by the time we got opposite Ditton corner he was out of breath and stopped to rest. As there was some danger of his being knocked down and trampled on by the mob of undergraduates who were rushing along cheering their college boats in the usual vociferous way, I interposed my pretty robust form between his slight figure and the crowd, and I have a vivid recollection of his standing on the bank looking gratefully at me and panting while the roaring multitude swept past us.5

It was on such a spring tide of emotion that Frazer’s introduction—perhaps ‘conversion’ is a better word—to anthropology took place. That he wanted to know about Smith’s special subject, in order to be a better friend to him, was undoubtedly part of the attraction of the new field. But there were other ways in which an ambitious young classical scholar might have found it attractive as well. One was that anthropology was then nearly ‘empty’, at any rate in comparison with the well-ploughed field of classics, and was as yet unorganised and unprofessionalized. Seemingly, everything in the discipline remained to be done. It had yet to be recognized as a field of study in the university, and therefore there were as yet no academic positions in it in Britain, but at least the continued existence of the empire and the continuing needs of the Colonial Service meant that this was likely to be a discipline with a future.

These larger considerations notwithstanding, on the personal level the tempo of their relationship picked up quickly, for as soon as Frazer had overcome his hesitations with ‘Pericles’, Smith immediately assigned him his first nonclassical essays, ‘Taboo’ and ‘Totemism’. These assignments had profound consequences: from the former sprang, five years later, The Golden Bough; from the latter, twenty-five years later, the four massive volumes of Totemism and Exogamy (1910), which in turn was the direct inspiration for Freud’s Totem und Tabu (1913), the title of which obviously chimes on Frazer’s.

At the time Frazer did not know enough to write on either subject with the authority appropriate to the Encyclopaedia. He could have been induced to take on these commissions only on the condition that Smith work with him closely. If we assume that the affection between the two men was mutual, then it is easy to see that Frazer’s requirement, which guaranteed continued intimacy, suited both of them. Indeed, we have a letter from Smith to their mutual

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5 Frazer, robust form and all, was about five feet four inches tall, and Smith little more than five feet.
friend J. S. Black, in which he says that he is going to make extra space for the article on ‘Totemism’: ‘There is no article in the volume for which I am more solicitous. I have taken much personal pains with it, guiding Frazer carefully in his treatment; and he has put in about seven months hard work on it to make it the standard article on the subject’.  

By 1885, then, Frazer had found his subject—the comparative anthropological study of the ‘primitive’ mind and ‘primitive’ religion, with special attention to mythology. Not only that, but he had also found his ideal colleague and friend, one from whom he could learn and one with whom he had total rapport. Their situation as Scotsmen among Sassenachs and the Free Church childhood they shared constituted a core of common experience, from which doubtless grew the allusive emotional shorthand available only to those for whom everything need not be explained. And although he could not share his friend’s special knowledge of the Semitic world, one would think that their feelings about religion, and in particular the religion in which both had been raised, might have become subjects of conversation as they took their long walks. But, remarkably, this was not the case.

He seldom alluded to the controversy he had had with a section of the Free Church in Scotland, and when he did so it was without the least trace of bitterness. He never once in my hearing uttered a word of complaint as to the treatment to which he had been subjected. On the contrary I received an impression, more from his expressive silence, I think, than from anything he said, that he was still deeply attached to the Free Church. I confess I never understood his inmost views on religion. On this subject he maintained a certain reserve which neither I nor (so far as I know) any of his intimates cared to break through. I never even approached, far less discussed, the subject with him.

Let us accept, as we must, that Smith remained a Christian lifelong, albeit of a sophisticated kind that would have been, and was, incomprehensible to his friend. 

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7 Stanley A. Cook, a friend and disciple, did not share Frazer’s inhibition about Smith’s religious views. He states flatly that Smith was always a Christian, and that ‘he had no sympathy with... any thorough-going humanism or rationalism’. *Centenary of the Birth on 8th November 1846 of the Reverend Professor W. Robertson Smith* (Aberdeen: The University Press, 1951), p. 16.
to most in his church. And Frazer—where did he stand? He tells us in his memoir about growing up in what sounds like the model of a pious Free Church home, with his father leading daily prayers for the entire household. The Frazer family too had its version of the strenuous Scottish Sunday, with its exclusive diet of divine service and edifying books. In view of what he became—I rate him along with H. G. Wells as the foremost propagandist for rationalism/secularism in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century—it may come as a surprise that Frazer tells us that he enjoyed it: ‘I never found this observance of the Sabbath irksome or wearisome. On the contrary I look back to those peaceful Sabbath days with something like fond regret, and the sound of Sabbath bells, even in a foreign land, still touches a deep chord in my heart’. He decisively cut the connection to the religion of his childhood sometime during his adolescence—I suspect while he was at the University of Glasgow—but without the rebellion that often accompanies such a momentous step. His final remark about his parents’ religion is worth noting: ‘I should add that although my father and my mother were deeply and sincerely pious they never made a parade of their religion; they neither talked of it themselves nor encouraged us children to do so; the subject was too sacred for common conversation’. The parallel, both verbal and otherwise, between the way he describes his father’s attitude toward religion and Smith’s is striking, and one to which I shall return.

Although Smith is remembered principally for his biblical criticism, among his other controversial ideas was that ancient and ‘primitive’ religions were essentially systems of practice rather than belief, of ritual rather than myth. In Smith’s view, in such religions it did not much matter what the individual members of the worshipping community believed about the gods, but it mattered supremely that as a group they carried out the right rituals in the correct way. Indeed, he went so far as to assert that ‘So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper’.

Whereas the dominant point of view among scholars of religion in Britain in the 1880s was intellectual, individualist, and psychological, Smith was

8 Creation and Evolution, p. 133.
irrationalist, collectivist, and sociological. It is therefore not a surprise that in his analysis of Semitic religion he focused not on creed but on practice, and specifically on sacrifice. In the most notable form of such sacrifice, according to Smith the tribe consumed the sacrificial animal victim that was normally forbidden to them because it was their divine totem-brother. In Frazer’s words, drawn from the distinctly cool obituary of Smith that he composed immediately after his passing, ‘Smith was the first to perceive the true nature of what he has called mystical or sacramental sacrifices’, the peculiarity of these being that in them the victim slain is ‘an animal or a man whom the worshippers regarded as divine, and of whose flesh and blood they sometimes partook, as a solemn form of communion with the deity’.10 Smith’s idea of a dying god was directly and immediately influential: as Frazer acknowledges in the preface to the first edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890), ‘the central idea of my essay—the conception of the slain god—is derived directly, I believe, from my friend [Robertson Smith]’.

The other explicit influence on Frazer in the first edition of *The Golden Bough* was the eminent German scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–80).11 Over the course of years of fieldwork Mannhardt compiled thousands of ‘popular superstitions and customs of the [European] peasantry’ because he understood that these would furnish ‘the fullest and most trustworthy evidence we possess as to the primitive religion of the Aryans’.12 Not only was Frazer indebted to Mannhardt for this immense body of fieldwork data, but he also took from him the key conception of the ‘vegetation spirit’ or ‘corn demon’, i.e., the divinity believed to be indwelling in growing things whom the rite is supposed to placate or gratify. This emphasis on action rather than belief among the primitives and ancients in the work of both Mannhardt and Smith, which became known as ‘ritualism’ at the turn of the century in the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, and Francis Cornford, had an effect on Frazer as well. Although all three editions of *The Golden Bough* are a theoretical jumble regarding the origin and meaning of mythology, Frazer was probably most sympathetic to ritualism in the early years of his career.

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11 Thus Frazer in the preface: ‘I have made great use of the works of the late W. Mannhardt, without which, indeed, my book could scarcely have been written’. ‘Preface to the First Edition’, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., I, xii.

12 Ibid.
Now we fast-forward past Smith’s death in 1894 to 1900, by which time Frazer has undergone a change of heart regarding the relationship of myth and ritual. In the preface to the second edition of the *Golden Bough* (1900), he notes that the French sociologists Hubert and Mauss have mistakenly concluded that Frazer agreed with Smith about the primacy of ritual over myth, and he goes out of his way to disavow Smith’s theory of the totem sacrament: Hubert and Mauss, he says,

> have represented my theory of the slain god as intended to supplement and complete Robertson Smith’s theory of the derivation of animal sacrifice in general from a totem sacrament. On this I have to say that the two theories are quite independent of one another. I never assented to my friend’s theory, and, so far as I can remember, he never gave me a hint that he assented to mine.\(^\text{13}\)

My point is not that his ideas have changed, but the importance that Frazer places upon emphasizing the distance between him and Smith. Not only have their ideas diverged, but (according to Frazer in 1900) they were never the same even when Smith was alive. Moreover, he doesn’t understand why Hubert and Mauss, who ought to know better, make this mistake. If this were the whole story, however, I wouldn’t have brought this to your attention.

When we move up a decade, to 1911, not only do we have Reinach’s remark with which I began, but also an astonishing exchange in which the Frazer-Smith relationship takes a striking posthumous turn.\(^\text{14}\) By this time *The Golden Bough* is in its twelve-volume third edition (all three of which are dedicated to Smith), and in Frazer’s mind Smith has become something of an icon, before which a quick genuflection regularly takes place whenever he passes by. Literally: in Frazer’s correspondence Smith’s name is nearly always preceded by the epithet ‘ever-lamented’.

On 10 October 1910 Frazer’s younger contemporary, R.R. Marett (1866–1943) was installed as reader in social anthropology in Oxford. In his inaugural lecture Marett wrote ‘That ritual, or in other words a routine of external forms, is historically prior to dogma was proclaimed years ago by Robertson Smith and others’.\(^\text{15}\) Here it is again—the same misreading of which Hubert

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. xxii.


\(^{15}\) The lecture, ‘The Birth of Humility’, was given on 27 October 1910 and published as a
and Mauss were guilty ten years earlier, and again Frazer doesn’t understand why this error remains current. Upon reading the lecture Frazer wrote, with some asperity, on 11 May 1911 to Marett: ‘Allow me to correct what I believe to be a mistake on your part. So far as I know Robertson Smith’s views from intimate personal acquaintance as well as from a study of his writings, he never proclaimed that ‘ritual is historically prior to dogma’, as you say he did. On the contrary I believe that he would have rejected such a view (as I do) as a manifest absurdity’. He then goes on at considerable length to explain what he believed Smith’s position to be, which unsurprisingly turns out to be the same as Frazer’s current views (‘Savage ritual, so far as I have studied it, seems to me to bear the imprint of reflexion and purpose stamped on it just as plainly as any actions of civilised men’.) Not only is Marett wrong but, he writes with some testiness, others have committed the same mistake. (‘You are not the first who has fallen into this error. A German . . . has ascribed precisely the same views that you do not only to Robertson Smith but to me! to me, who repudiate them as an absurdity’.)

Marett replies two days later, denying that he has erred and citing the passages from *The Religion of the Semites* that I have already quoted in which Smith sets forth the ritualist hypothesis. Regarding the sentence in which Frazer says that savage ritual is imbued with just as much ‘reflexion’ as that of any civilised people, Marett will have none of it.

If you print your view in that form, using the word reflexion thus unqualified, I believe that every psychologist in Europe, including [Frazer’s friend James] Ward, will be down upon you. No one would be such a fool as to say that there was no reflexion at work in savage religion; these things that we distinguish as higher and lower, conceptual and perceptual, processes shade off into each other, so that the difference is always one of degree rather than of kind. But to say that the stamp of reflexion is ‘just as’ plain seems on the face of it to say that both types of religion—the savage and the civilised—are equally reflexive, or each in its way as reflexive as the other. If, however, you mean that plainly there is a very little reflexion at work in savage religion, and, equally plainly, there is a great deal of it at work in civilised religion, then no one will deny that; but they will claim the right, when drawing a pamphlet by the Clarendon Press immediately afterward, but is more easily consulted as part of Marett’s *The Threshold of Religion*, 2nd edn (London: Clarendon, 1914), 169–202, at 181.
broad contrast, to call the former ‘unreflective’ as compared with the latter. And Robertson Smith went further; he called it ‘unconscious’.

Faced with citations of Smithian chapter and verse, Frazer, definitely surprised, backs off.

The passages of Robertson Smith to which you call my attention certainly support your interpretation of his view more fully than I had supposed. But I still incline to think that he was emphasising a novel view (the importance of the study of ritual as compared with myth or dogma) and that in doing so he omitted to state (what he probably assumed) that every ritual is preceded in the minds of the men who institute it by a definite train of reasoning, even though that train of reasoning may not be definitely formulated in words and promulgated as a dogma.

He backs off but he will not give up. In ‘He omitted to state what he probably assumed’ we see that Frazer is as willing to read Smith’s mind as he is that of the savages. I should like to suggest that at least part of the reason for such unwillingness to yield lies in what Smith had come to mean to him over the twenty years since his death. Frazer was by lifelong inclination and temperament a hardcore anticlerical rationalist who had in his adolescence shaken off Christianity, which it is not too much to say was most directly represented by his dominant and pious father. Then he meets and is swept off his feet by Robertson Smith, who embodies a new kind of religion with depths and complexities that he had never imagined, and one that he could never fathom. Obviously the example of Robertson Smith did not cause him to embrace Christianity once again—recall that religion, for both his father and for Smith, was too sacred for ordinary conversation—but there can be no doubt that he wrote the first edition of The Golden Bough while still under the personal spell of Smith. I should like to suggest that his passionate affection for Smith prevented him from disagreeing with him openly because of the possibility of a disastrous rupture were the disagreement to go too far. But once Smith was gone, Frazer’s resentment at what I see as ten years of enforced reticence made itself felt. I hope that I have not done violence to the evidence when I note that he recapitulates the move away from Daniel Frazer with a second move away from his—what shall I call him? Obviously Smith wasn’t old enough to be of Daniel Frazer’s generation, but he was undeniably his intellectual father,
who opened up a wholly new mental landscape. Unfortunately, however, this new landscape, as created by Frazer in the seventeen years since Smith’s death, had no space for the real Smith. It would be silly to present the timid Frazer as an Oedipal parricide seething with rage on the Cam, but the need to reject the father is, and has been, a constant among intellectuals. I regret now that I did not see this pattern earlier or I would have argued it at length in my biography, twenty years ago, but I hope that it is still useful to have discovered what ‘genuit Frazerum’ might mean.16

16 The rejection of Smith is not the only time Frazer disavowed an intellectual parent. During his undergraduate days, as his library shows, he was a passionate admirer of the works of Herbert Spencer, and when he made his public ‘debut’ at the Anthropological Institute in 1885 he went out of his way to mention that Spencer’s presence in the audience was a source of special pleasure. After the 1880s, however, Spencer drops out of his intellectual life completely, and when in 1922 Frazer came to summarize the history of anthropology [‘The Scope and Method of Mental Anthropology’, in Garnered Sheaves (London: Macmillan, 1927), 234–51], Spencer has been airbrushed out of the picture. See Robert Ackerman, J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40–4.
When William Robertson Smith is mentioned in contemporary histories of Scotland, it is almost always in relation to his dismissal from the Professorship of Hebrew at the Free Church College in Aberdeen in 1881.¹ The shadow of that event casts itself on the historical landscape as an indication of the intellectual backwardness that results when national institutions are dominated by ‘fanatical zealots’.² Christopher Harvie, for instance, notes that while ‘the reformed English universities were gaining momentum in scholarship and research, the Free Kirk was persecuting Robertson Smith, its greatest theologian and a pioneer of social anthropology, for heresy’.³ The irony of the event is certainly striking, for no one, after all, should have been more central to the life and the development of the Free Church than Robertson Smith. His father, William Pirie Smith, was a schoolteacher who had been one of the earliest to be called to the ministry in the new Church (in 1845), and who undertook the education of his children himself, therefore ensuring their grounding in the beliefs of a Free Church. Robertson Smith, born in 1846, was one of the outstanding figures in the first generation that grew up in the ethos of the Free Church, an ethos to which he was so committed that he gave up a promising career in science in order to pursue theological studies. That the Free Church would wish to rid itself of this brilliant product of its own culture, who had been appointed a professor at the age of only twenty-four, would seem to confirm the views of those who saw in the Disruption itself nothing but a symptom of the inherent destructiveness of Scottish culture. As David Craig put it in the 1940s,

Much of the national spirit, often in rabid form, went into the Low Kirk religion, but its spirit . . . was irreconcilable with the cultivated ethos . . . it led directly to the Disruption of 1843. This is another of

the deep disunities which ran off the energies of 18th century Scotland into dispute and partisan bitterness, anyway characteristic of the race, which made for a stultifying monotony of idiom, religious, political, poetics—an inhumane extreme of partiality, in which positions defined themselves more by violence of opposition than by their positive natures.4

The Free Church’s treatment of Robertson Smith and his subsequent departure for Cambridge has been taken as confirmation not only that nineteenth-century Scotland ‘was irreconcilable with the cultivated ethos’ but that it had retreated from the achievements of the Enlightenment which had made eighteenth-century Scotland such a force in world culture. After the successes of the Enlightenment, the depth of nineteenth-century Scotland’s failure is, to T. C. Smout, beyond understanding: ‘I am astounded by the tolerance, in a country boasting of its high moral standards and basking in the spiritual leadership of a Thomas Chalmers, of unspeakable urban squalor, compounded of drink abuse, bad housing, low wages, long hours and sham education’.5

By being driven out of Scotland, however, Robertson Smith did not escape the negative evaluation of the culture in which he grew up. One of Robertson Smith’s major achievements was to bring to a successful completion in 1888 the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which had started publication in 1875 under the editorship of T. Spencer Baynes of the University of St Andrews, and of which Smith became joint editor in 1881. The Ninth Edition employed such distinguished contributors, and presented work so much at the forefront of contemporary intellectual development, that it is often referred to as the ‘Scholar’s Edition’. That Ninth Edition, however, was the focus of Alasdair MacIntyre’s opening Gifford lecture of 1988 (published as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 1990), in which he attacks the structure of the *Encyclopaedia* as based on the presupposition that ‘substantive rationality is unitary, that there is a single, if perhaps complex, conception of what the standards and the achievements of rationality are’,6 and that it is the ‘characteristic of genuine science, as contrasted with the thought of the prescientific and the non-scientific, that it has a particular kind of history, one of relatively continuous progress’.7 This MacIntyre

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7 Ibid., 20.
contrasted to ‘our’ cultural situation, in which ‘we inhabit a culture a central feature of which is the presence of, and to some degree a debate between, conflicting, alternative conceptions of rationality’, conceptions that force us to be aware of the past of science as one of ‘ruptures and discontinuities’. Robertson Smith is taken to be typical of an ‘encyclopaedism’ which assumes its own superiority over the past precisely because it is itself the outcome of the progress which has made scientific truth possible. Ironically, in MacIntyre’s view, this actually makes it impossible for encyclopaedists to understand the past because they impose on it their own thought-categories, on the assumption that those categories are universally valid. It is for this reason, according to MacIntyre, that Robertson Smith—and, following him, J. G. Frazer—fail to understand the notion of ‘taboo’ in what they took to be ‘primitive’ cultures: ‘it never even occurred to the contributors to the Ninth Edition to enter imaginatively into the standpoint of those allegedly primitive and savage peoples whom they were studying, let alone to enquire how they and their moral and religious theory and practice might be understood from the point of view of those alien cultures’. If this is true of Robertson Smith, it is true also of Scottish intellectual life in general, since the Ninth Edition is the last edition of the Britannica directed from Scotland (the tenth was a reprint of the Ninth with a supplement, and the eleventh was published by Cambridge University Press), and since MacIntyre also takes the institution of the Gifford Lectures, founded by Adam Gifford in 1888, as themselves part of that encyclopaedist culture. Such Scottish encyclopaedism is a ‘vanished and vanquished culture’ whose values ‘nobody now shares’; it is the last gasp of an earlier ‘Enlightenment’ about to be expunged by the chaos of the twentieth century, and insofar as it achieved anything, it was simply, as George Davie argued in a book cited by MacIntyre, to give ‘a new lease of life to the standards of the Scottish Enlightenment’. Like those earlier Enlightenments which it continues in an etiolated form, its real destination (and this is MacIntyre’s fundamental reason for challenging its values) was a future in which ‘the Encyclopaedia would have displaced the Bible as the canonical book, or set of books, of the culture’.

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8 Ibid., 23
9 Ibid., 24.
10 Ibid., 182.
11 Ibid., 217.
12 Ibid., 170.
14 Ibid., 19.
The inadequacy of these historical and the philosophical accounts of Robertson Smith, and of the Scottish culture of which he was a part, is suggested by comments made by Sir Herbert Grierson, in an interview with Henry W. Meikle in the 1950s. Grierson, Professor of English Literature in Aberdeen from 1895 till 1915, and subsequently in Edinburgh till 1935, was the most distinguished literary critic in Britain in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, and he recalled that in his student days ‘there was a wider interest in religious questions than prevails today – Robertson Smith and biblical criticism revolutionised Scottish religion and thought’. Far from Robertson Smith being ejected from a recalcitrant and regressive Scotland, or being the publisher of an already agreed and undisputed set of ‘truths’, in Grierson’s recollection he represents a revolutionary transformation not only of Scottish religion but of Scottish thought more generally. To see what this might mean we have to recollect Robertson Smith’s connection not with German theology or the beginnings of social anthropology, but his early connections with Scottish science. Peter Guthrie Tait, Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, noted in an obituary in 1894 that ‘unfortunately for Science, and (in many respects) for himself, his splendid intellectual power was diverted, early in his career, from Physics and Mathematics, in which he had given sure earnest of success’. So impressed was Tait by Robertson Smith’s potential as a scientist that while Smith was studying theology at New College he was also employed as Tait’s assistant in his new laboratory at Edinburgh. There he carried out experiments to test the theories of electricity and magnetism being developed by James Clerk Maxwell, who had been a friend of Tait’s since their schooldays and a close collaborator in the development of Tait’s work with William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin) of the University of Glasgow. Robertson Smith’s experiments were sufficiently successful to result in a paper in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh entitled ‘On the Flow of Electricity in Conducting Surfaces’ (1870). Even though Robertson Smith decided to pursue a theological rather than a scientific career, Tait and he were to stay close friends till Smith’s death and Clerk Maxwell was

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15 Meikle was the author of *Scotland and the French Revolution* and librarian of the National Library of Scotland. The interview seems to be a radio discussion but the transcript of the interview does not give a date of transmission.

16 Grierson papers, Aberdeen University Library, MS 2478/8.


18 The paper is collected in John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal (eds), William Robertson Smith, *Lectures and Essays* (London, 1912).
to be the principal scientific adviser to Robertson Smith on the development of the Ninth Edition, to which he also contributed a substantial number of articles.

Robertson Smith was thus very closely connected with one of the most revolutionary developments in British science in the nineteenth century. At the time he was Tait’s assistant, Tait had just published, along with William Thomson, their *Treatise on Natural Philosophy* (1867), which had set out to overturn Newtonian physics, replacing ‘Newton’s *Principia* of force with a new *Principia* of energy’.\(^{19}\) That displacement of Newton was actually fulfilled, however, by Clerk Maxwell’s *Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism* (1873), which, as Einstein himself acknowledged, was ‘the most profound and fruitful that physics has experienced since the time of Newton’.\(^{20}\) The work of these three Scottish physicists established a new conception of ‘Physical Reality...as represented by continuous fields’\(^{21}\) and redefined the fundamental structure of the universe as energy in transformation rather than as material atomic particles. The radicalism of this new ‘energy physics’ in Scotland in the 1860s and 70s can be gauged by comparing their view of the universe with that presented in John Tyndall’s famous ‘Belfast Address’, of 1874, to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in which he argued for the superiority of scientific rationality over religious belief and for religion’s need to submit its assertions about the world to the test of scientific evidence. Robertson Smith was actually present at the address and wrote a letter to the *Northern Whig* to point out the failings of Tyndall’s historical knowledge and religious understanding,\(^{22}\) a letter which Tait believed would be ‘laid to my charge’, so close were their relations.\(^{23}\) What most angered the Scottish energy scientists about Tyndall’s address—and Clerk Maxwell and Thomson were just as outraged as Tait and Smith—was not just what they judged to be his historical misunderstandings but what they believed to be his already outdated conception of the material universe. Tyndall quoted approvingly the words of Democritus to the effect that, *The atoms are infinite in number and infinitely various in form; they strike together, and the lateral motions and whirlings which thus arise are the beginnings of worlds*,


\(^{21}\) Ibid.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.
while Thomson and Maxwell were developing conceptions of atoms as a fluid, spinning in vortices whose rotations produced the ‘flow’ of electricity in the space between them. Instead of the materialism of atomic particles proposed by Tyndall, they were proposing a universe in which, in the words of Macquorn Rankine, another of their collaborators, ‘all forms of physical energy, whether visible motion, heat, light, magnetism, electricity, chemical action, or other forms not yet understood, are mutually convertible; that the total amount of physical energy in the universe is unchangeable, and varies merely its condition and locality, by conversion from one form to another, or by transference from one portion of matter to another’.\(^\text{24}\) In this universe matter was simply the transient form of an energy which was in continual flux: whereas ‘matter is always the same, though it may be masked in various combinations, energy is constantly changing the form in which it presents itself. The one is like the eternal, unchangeable Fate or \textit{Necessitas} of the ancients; the other is Proteus himself in the variety and rapidity of its transformations.’\(^\text{25}\)

Far from Scotland in the 1860s and 70s being a society turned inward in a parochial obsession with the aftermath of the Disruption, it was the source of the single most important development of the nineteenth-century physics: Tait’s estimate in his review of Maxwell’s \textit{Treatise} in 1873—which described his friend as having ‘a name which requires only the stamp of antiquity to raise it almost to the level of that of Newton’\(^\text{26}\)—is a view which has been upheld by history. As Bruce J. Hunt puts it, ‘by the 1890s the four “Maxwell’s equations” were recognized as the foundation of one of the strongest and most successful theories in all of physics; they had taken their place as companions, even rivals, to Newton’s laws of mechanics’\(^\text{27}\). Indeed, unlike Newton’s laws, they survived the arrival of Einsteinian physics entirely unchanged. As Maxwell’s recent biographer, Basil Mahon puts it, ‘Maxwell’s equations were \textit{the} basic laws of the physical world’ because ‘Einstein’s axiom that the speed of light was an absolute constant . . . was completely determined by Maxwell’s theory.’\(^\text{28}\) As Mahon’s title puts it, Maxwell was ‘the man who changed everything’—except


\(^{25}\) Peter Guthrie Tait and Balfour Stewart, \textit{The Unseen Universe or Physical Speculations on a Future State} (London, 1875), 82.


\(^{28}\) Basil Mahon, \textit{The Man Who Changed Everything} (Chichester, 2003), 181.
that he did it not on his own but in conjunction with a group of Scottish scientists which happened to include the theologian William Robertson Smith.

Such a radical rethinking of the nature of reality was nothing if not a ‘rupture’, a ‘discontinuity’, involving ‘conflicting, alternative conceptions of rationality’. Indeed, even between these scientists themselves ‘conflicting, alternative conceptions of rationality’ emerged, driven by one of the most famous thought-experiments in science, which came to be known, thanks to Thomson, as ‘Maxwell’s demon’. The demon has lived an extraordinary life in modern science,²⁹ but it began as an effort to confront, and to understand, one of the consequences of Thomson and Tait’s analysis of energy, which involved both the irreversibility of transformations of energy, and the inevitable loss in all transformations of some energy into unusable forms. The inevitability of this dissipation of energy would lead, in the end, to a universe without any differential in temperature and in which no activity will be possible. ‘The result’, as Thomson put it, ‘would inevitably be a state of universal rest and death, if the universe were finite and left to obey existing laws’.³⁰ To Thomson, this was entirely consistent with his Calvinist faith and with Biblical authority,³¹ but in the form of the demon Maxwell challenged the nature of Thomson’s basic conception of the laws of physics. Maxwell’s demon is a molecule-sized creature who sits between two containers of gases, one hotter than the other. The temperature of the gases is a function of the velocity of the particles of which it consists, but in any gas there will be particles which are faster (hotter) or slower (colder) than the overall average. The demon operates a shutter which allows particles to pass between the two containers but only allows the fastest from the cooler container and the slowest from the warmer container to be exchanged. As a consequence, heat (the average speed of particles) ‘flows’ from the cooler to the warmer chamber, reversing the apparent necessity of the second law. What Maxwell’s demon implied was that the second law of thermodynamics, which requires that heat flow from hotter to colder substances, is not, as Kelvin believed, a necessary outcome of the nature of the universe but simply a statistical probability which, given the statistically vast scale of the universe, sometimes would not happen. This is the beginning of what we now know as the study of stochastic systems, or ‘chaos

²⁹ See Harvey S. Leff and Andrew F. Rex, Maxwell’s Demon: Entropy, Information, Computing (Bristol, 1990).
³¹ See Smith and Wise, Energy and Empire: A biographical study of Lord Kelvin, 535.
theory’. What was significant, however, was that this was science in the form of a fairy-tale, using the imagination as a conceptual tool to turn inside-out the most fundamental presumptions about the nature of the universe—which was why, to Thomson, it was demonic.

That Robertson Smith was aware of this aspect of Maxwell’s thought is clear from his involvement in another co-authored publication by Peter Guthrie Tait, an enormously successful and influential book entitled *The Unseen Universe* (1875), written in conjunction with another Scottish scientist, Balfour Stewart. Tait and Stewart used Maxwell’s demon to suggest a similar reversibility between physical and psychical energy: if the universe consisted only of energy in transformation, then some of that energy must be psychic as well as physical, because just as the ‘law of gravitation assures us that any displacement which takes place in the very heart of the earth will be felt throughout the universe’ so, they argued, ‘we may even imagine that the same thing will hold true of those molecular motions which accompany thought’.32 The consequence is that all past mental acts are in some fashion stored up as spiritual energy in another, unseen dimension of the universe, a dimension which holds out the possibility of personal immortality. *The Unseen Universe* was first published anonymously but when its striking success rapidly required a second edition Tait and Stewart accepted that they should be acknowledged as authors. At the same time, Tait wrote to Robertson Smith to ask if he too should be acknowledged as one of the ‘aiders and abetters’ of the book.33 What *The Unseen Universe* suggested was both a very different conception of the universe from Tyndall’s but also a very different conception of science, one in which science and religion were not only not in conflict but were, in fact, two different ways of conceptualising the same truth. Which is why the book began with a long prologue providing an account of ancient ‘myths’ that pointed to the immortality of the soul. Those myths, which Robertson Smith had helped compile, suggested that the knowledge achieved by ‘primitive’ peoples might contain forms of the truth that would be uncovered in a different fashion by science. Science was not, as MacIntyre would have it, a progress from primitive ignorance to modern knowledge, nor a process that began from ‘the data, the facts’ and developed by ‘the unifying synthetic conceptions which order the facts by making them intelligible as exemplifying laws’;34 science, for Maxwell and his collaborators, worked in precisely the opposite way:

32 Tait and Stewart, *The Unseen Universe*, 156.
34 MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 20.
We are accustomed to consider the universe as made up of parts, and mathematicians usually begin by considering a single particle, and then conceiving its relation to another particle and so on. This has generally been supposed the most natural method. To conceive a particle, however, requires a process of abstraction, since all our perceptions are related to extended bodies, so that the idea of the ALL that is in our consciousness at a given instant is a mathematical method in which we proceed FROM THE WHOLE TO THE PARTS instead of from the parts to the whole.  

As a consequence, it is not from data that one begins but from a synthetic model:

The conception of a particle having its motion connected with that of a vortex by perfect rolling contact may appear somewhat awkward. I do not bring it forward as a mode of connexion existing in nature, or even as that which I would willingly assent to as an electrical hypothesis. It is, however, a mode of connexion which is mechanically conceivable, and easily investigated, and it serves to bring out the actual mechanical connexions between the known electromagnetic phenomena: so that I venture to say that any one who understands the provisional and temporary nature of this hypothesis, will find himself rather helped than hindered by it in his search after the true interpretation of the phenomena.  

It is the conceptualisation of a model system that makes it possible to find ‘the true interpretation of the phenomena’, where the objectivity of the word ‘true’ is balanced, as it was in Robertson Smith’s account of Biblical truth, by the subjectivity of the word ‘interpretation’.

That this highly provisional way of approaching scientific truth was general in Robertson Smith’s circle can be seen in the work of Robert Louis Stevenson and J. G. Frazer. Stevenson was one of the students whose work Robertson Smith had to oversee in Tait’s laboratory, and in his ‘Humble Remonstrance’ of 1884 he argued against realism in fiction because, ‘a proposition of

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geometry does not compete with life; and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for a work of art. Both are reasonable, both untrue to the crude fact; both inhere in nature, neither represents it.  

For Stevenson, realists not only mistake the nature of art but, from the point of view of energy science, they also mistake the nature of the ‘real’, since material reality is an illusion that conceals rather than reveals the truth. That this theory of art was at one with the energy science which Stevenson encountered in Tait’s laboratory is clear from *The Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* (1886), which is both an ‘unrealistic’ thought experiment—along the lines of Maxwell’s demon—and an analysis of the consequences of the new physics of energy. The ‘dissipation’ to which Jekyll succumbs when transformed into Hyde mirrors not only the dissipation produced by the effort to reject a repressive Victorian Puritanism but the ‘dissipation’ of energy in Thomson and Tait’s physics. It is this entropic universe that Jekyll inhabits, as is vividly presented in the cityscapes through which the characters move:

Mr Utterson beheld a marvellous number of degrees and hues of twilight; for here it would be a glow of a rich, lurid brown, like the light of some strange conflagration; and here, for a moment, the fog would be quite broken up, and a haggard shaft of daylight would glance between the swirling wreaths. The dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses, with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers, and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been rekindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer’s eyes, like a district of some city in nightmare.

The city is decaying towards entropy’s ‘indistinguishable equilibrium of ruin’ (as David Masson, Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh had described it) and the energy it expends on lamps will only hasten the ‘reinvasion of darkness’. Stevenson’s story involves an apparent defiance of the irreversibility of energy transformations proposed by the new science, since Jekyll is able to undo his transformation into Hyde and escape

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39 David Masson, *Recent British Philosophy, A review with criticisms, including some comments on Mr. Mill’s answer to Sir William Hamilton* (London, 1867; 1865), 151–2; as editor of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, Masson had published accounts of the consequences of the energy science by Kelvin and Tait.
the consequences of Hyde’s crimes. Such reversibility, however, is an illusion and those who break into his locked chamber on the final night hear that ‘the kettle with a startling noise boiled over’, symbolically announcing energy’s inevitable dissipation. Transformed into Hyde, Jekyll can provide himself with access to immediate energy greater than his own, but with each expenditure of Hyde’s energy Jekyll’s future energy resources are being consumed. That is why, towards his end, Jekyll comes to think of ‘Hyde, for all his energy of life, as of something not only hellish but inorganic’, as though ‘the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life’. To resist being transformed involuntarily back into Hyde, Jekyll requires not only ‘a double dose’ of his potion but ‘a great effort as of gymnastics’. The energy which Hyde expends leaves Jekyll ‘a creature eaten up and emptied by fever, languidly weak in both body and mind’, because he has reached an entropic state in which he cannot sustain himself.

In Frazer’s case, he begins his Gifford Lectures on The Worship of Nature by describing how,

It is not the ‘real’ which we deal with, but a visionary representation of it. That Frazer’s world is also tied to the new energy science—Frazer attended Thomson’s lectures on natural philosophy at Glasgow University—is clear from the conclusion of The Golden Bough:

40 Stevenson, Merkheim, Jekyll and the Merry Men, 268.
41 Ibid., 292.
42 Ibid., 292.
43 Ibid., 292.
The dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science. But a dark shadow lies athwart the far end of this fair prospect. For however vast the increase in knowledge and of power which the future may have in store for man, he can scarcely hope to stay the sweep of those great forces which seem to be making silently but relentlessly for the destruction of all this starry universe in which our earth swims as a speck or mote... Yet the philosopher who trembles at the idea of such distant catastrophes may console himself by reflecting that these gloomy apprehensions, like the earth and sun themselves, are only parts of that unsubstantial world which thought has conjured up out of the void, and that the phantoms which the subtle enchantress has evoked to-day she may ban to-morrow. They too, like so much that to common eyes seems solid, may melt into air, into thin air.46

Stevenson and Frazer were both contributors to the Ninth Edition and their shared sense of the necessary unreality required in order that the ‘truth’ of the science can be represented in any human communication is evidence of the culture’s anti-realist, anti-objectivist conception of our relation with the world. Far from conceiving progress as the development of history towards their own ‘timeless truths’, as MacIntyre describes them,47 they saw their ‘truths’ as personal constructions that sketched the provisional outline of a universe as yet unseen, and perhaps unseeable.

This is no less true of Robertson Smith’s conception of the history of religion, which is not the unfolding of a steady spiritual progress but rather one of dramatic loss and subsequent recovery—in the form, for instance, of the Reformation’s recovery of the principles of an earlier Christianity, and of the Free Church’s subsequent recovery of those Reformation principles. Far from representing a smoothly objective uncovering of a timeless truth, Robertson Smith presents the history of religion as a profoundly personal engagement with a God whose revelation was always relative to the psychological and historical circumstances of its recipient. What was true in the past—‘God accommodated His work of revelation and grace to the laws of limited human nature, that He unfolded His plan under the conditions of historical development’48—was equally true in the present, and what was religiously important

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47 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 27.
was not the achievement of a timeless universality of ultimate truth but of a personal relationship with God:

We are to seek in the Bible, not a body of abstract truth, but the living personal history of God’s gracious dealing with men from age to age, till at length in Christ’s historical work, the face of the Eternal is fully revealed and we by faith can enter into the fullest and freest fellowship with an incarnate God.49

It is not universally ‘abstract truth’ which Robertson Smith sought but the personal ‘fellowship with an incarnate God’; and this is a truth which can as easily be lost as found, as the history of religion testifies. History may exhibit progress but far from being guaranteed, progress is dependent on the courageous individualism which was exhibited by the prophets of the Old Testament in their refusal to accept the values of their own society, and by their engagement with ‘a new and living power, the utterance of a new life, which because it is a new life, can spring only from the infinite source of all life’.50 Moral truth is not something that can be discovered by abstract reasoning and if its history has proved progressive it is not because of the unopposed unfolding of historical necessity: rather, it is the result of the courageous commitment of individuals to discovering the meaning of a profoundly personal relationship between humanity and God. If there is indeed an evolutionary and ‘organic development of history’ it is one that can only be known because it has been ‘worked out in and through human personality, by a personal redeeming God’.51

Here Robertson Smith’s work is closely aligned with that of another contributor to the Ninth Edition, Andrew Seth, whose philosophy focused on the importance of the ‘personal’ and on the significance of ‘personality’ in our understanding both of the world and of God—most importantly in his book on Hegelianism and Personality (1887). Far from accepting, as MacIntyre suggests, that ‘the data’ of the sciences ‘present themselves and speak for themselves’, producing the ‘belief in the wrongheadedness of imposing any test of commitment to any theoretical or doctrinal standpoint upon those who are to consider such data’,52 what Seth suggests in his article on ‘Philosophy’ in the Ninth Edition is that, ‘the world is not a collection of individual facts

49 ‘What History Teaches’, Black and Chrystal (eds), Lectures and Essays, 229 – 30.
50 ‘On the Question of Prophecy’, Black and Chrystal (eds), Lectures and Essays, 189.
51 Ibid., 165.
52 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, 16.
existing side by side and capable of being known separately. A fact is nothing except in its relations to other facts; and as these relations are multiplied in the progress of knowledge the nature of the so-called fact is indefinitely modified. Moreover, every statement of fact involves certain general notions and theories, so that the facts of the separate sciences cannot be stated except in terms of the conceptions or hypotheses which are assumed by the particular science.\footnote{http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/P/PHI/philosophy-02.html [accessed 18 September 2008].} Seth here effectively anticipates MacIntyre’s assumption that ‘there are always at least two modes of conceptualising and characterizing the data which constitute its subject matter, a pre-theoretical (although not of course preconceptual) prior-to-enquiry mode, and a mode internal to that particular type of enquiry’.\footnote{MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry}, 17.} This was the lesson that had been impressed on Robertson Smith’s generation in the emergence of experimental psychology (led, in Britain, by Alexander Bain), for experimental psychology engaged with elements of what had previously been treated as part of the fundamental business of philosophy—the nature of consciousness. What continues to make psychology and philosophy different, for Seth, despite their shared territory, is that psychology aspires to the objectification by which science limits its field of enquiry, thus making the identification of ‘facts’ possible, while philosophy as a discipline refuses to ignore that all such objectifications are possible only on the basis of subjectivity, on the basis of the personal, which the other sciences must exclude from their account: ‘The sciences, one and all, deal with world of objects, but the ultimate fact as we know it is the existence of an object for a subject’.\footnote{http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/P/PHI/philosophy-02.html [accessed 18 September 2008].} For this reason we have to accept that we never discover ultimate truths but have to be satisfied with ‘the conception of degrees of truth or adequacy’.\footnote{A. Seth Pringle-Pattison, ‘The Venture of Theism’, \textit{Man’s Place in the Cosmos and Other Essays} (Edinburgh, 1902), 243.}

Those ‘degrees of truth or adequacy’ of value are not, for Seth, the introduction of an unstoppable relativity that leads inevitably to scepticism, because human beings are not passive reflectors of the world of facts but are required to act in the world to transform them. However ‘scientific’ and ‘evolutionary’ Robertson Smith’s account of the development of religion might be, its ‘truths’ would have been meaningless without its more important concomitant—the transformation of Christian ethics as \textit{action} in the present. As George Adam
Smith noted in his *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*, the ‘revival of the Prophets in the Scottish pulpit’ as a result of Robertson Smith’s historical account of them combined with the advent of socialism: ‘Every department of religious activity felt its effects. Sermons became more ethical: the studies of Bible classes in the Old Testament, instead of being confined to the historical books, were extended to the prophetical; and a considerable body of popular literature had appeared, which expounds the teaching of the Prophets and in many cases applies it to modern life’.  

A truth which was ‘personal’ and which was evidenced in ‘action’ is very different from the kind of neutral ‘rational superiority’ that MacIntyre attributes to Robertson Smith and to Frazer. MacIntyre, in effect, attributes to Robertson Smith the very theory of an objective scientific rationality which Clerk Maxwell’s ‘demon’, as an imaginative mind-experiment, refutes, and therefore attributes to the whole project of the Ninth Edition a theory of knowledge which its most prominent contributors—Frazer as much as Clerk Maxwell—set out to challenge. Precisely because they took seriously the *historical* understanding of the evolution of knowledge they saw their own knowledge as hypothetical rather than certain, as provisional rather than conclusive, and as inevitably subject to future revision in the light of the action which flowed from it.

Far from being a ‘vanished and vanquished culture’, irrelevant to the concerns of our modern world, it is precisely in the intersection of science, religion, anthropology and philosophy in late nineteenth-century Scotland that the crises of incommensurable and untranslatable realms of knowledge—which MacIntyre takes to be typical of our ‘modern’ predicament—are brought into focus. And far from being a culture in a kind of entropic decline, late nineteenth-century Scotland is just as central to developments in international thought as its eighteenth-century predecessor. Alasdair MacIntyre describes this period, with the intention of *reducing* its significance, as ‘a second Scottish Enlightenment’: the term ‘Enlightenment’ might no longer be relevant to its concerns but as a period in which the nation’s intellectual achievements were as significant as in the period usually described as the Scottish Enlightenment, it is, in fact, only too appropriate. And Robertson Smith, because of his strategic placing in relation to Scottish physics, Scottish theology and the emergence

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58 MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, 181.
of the discipline of anthropology, was at the heart of the reconfiguration of the intellectual landscape that this Enlightenment brought about. And because of his role as editor of the Ninth Edition he was also the communicative centre through which a Scottish intelligentsia, dispersed across the United Kingdom and across the Empire, were brought into contact with each other. From John Muir in California (who wrote the entry on California) to Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa (who wrote in defence of the rights of Polynesian peoples in a way that challenges MacIntyre’s assumptions about the relation Scots to the ‘primitive’); from Clerk Maxwell in Glasgow (providing articles on atoms), to Hugh F.C. Cleghorn in Madras (commissioner for the conservancy of forests and author of the entry on arboriculture), Robertson Smith was the centre around which this second Scottish Enlightenment developed, linking physicists and theologians, novelists and ecologists, historians and philosophers. As Welllhausen, the German theologian acknowledged, in a letter celebrating the conclusion of the Ninth Edition, what was remarkable was that it seemed as though Robertson Smith had been ‘predestined to hold together literature and science in combination’:59 he went on to add that he doubted ‘if anything of the same kind could be achieved anywhere else than in England’,60 but he should of course have written ‘Scotland’, a country whose generalist traditions encouraged the degree of interdisciplinarity that could turn a physicist into a theologian, a classicist into a philosophical anthropologist and a novelist into the creator of a myth which recorded the outcome of the new physics. Not a culture in decline, but a nation of considerable energy.

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60 Ibid.