

After the Mythology of the Primitive

Nathan Schneider | December, 2004

In the contemporary scholarship of religion as it has developed in the West, a peculiar tension has emerged whereby many of the most useful and fundamental theoretical work was done with methods and assumptions that have since been rejected for scientific or philosophical reasons. In particular, developments in postcolonial theory and recent anthropology have devastated the empirical basis for the theories of seminal thinkers such as Durkheim, Freud, and Eliade. We see much more clearly now, the newer scholarship contends, how assumptions and mythologies operating among these thinkers concerning primarily attitudes toward the idea of “primitive” led to a heuristic that was more *ideology* than the *science* which they claimed to be practicing. As the main source texts for academic religious studies, with influences that spread from and into anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines, such accusations make a precarious position for contemporary thinkers who have put the theories of these earlier writings to seemingly good use. That is to say, the whole field of religious theory may appear for us at the outset of the 21st century to rest on unsound foundations.

The benefit that scholars of religion continue to find in these works that are apparently to be rejected does propose a sort of justification. Cannot we, regardless of the methods of the structuralists, simply extract their frameworks and discard the methods? This indeed is what many contemporary thinkers have sought to do. What one finds, however, that these theories do betray their ideological origins and cannot be separated from them. To show this I will examine several important frameworks by adapting the methods proposed by Bruce Lincoln.¹ Ostensibly,

¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), esp. 147-151.

the mythologies that permeate these works are debilitating. Nevertheless, after the exercise of dismantling is completed, the academy returns full circle once again to an interest in the foregoing work, with all of its difficulties intact. It takes on a new, if different usefulness, and itself a subject role. I argue that the theory of past ideology of the primitive has become for us what the primitive itself was for those thinkers: a vision of insularity and certainty now lost forever in the postmodern, an “other” which is in part ourselves, and through which we may rightly find self-awareness of our present state.

Divesting the Primitive (the primitive as error)

Durkheim directs his *Elementary Forms* according to the assumption that very much motivated the anthropological religious studies preceding and following him:

I said at the beginning of this book that the religion whose study I was undertaking contained within itself the most characteristic elements of religious life. ... I have ... found within it all the great ideas and all the principal forms of ritual conduct on which even the most advanced religions are based.²

What to him was quite clear has for us become less so; the tremendous variety of religious behavior that anthropology has since revealed, as well as the startling complexity of belief and ritual structures that can exist even in societies that seem to the modern West comparatively simplistic, makes Durkheim’s premise rather more tenuous. Given the diversity among even comparably premodern societies, that a universal theory could emerge by only attempting to treat

² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1995), 418.

a single example seems highly dismissive. This approach resembles the idea of the atom, a smallest unit, which had proved so useful in chemistry and physics during Durkheim's lifetime. Science seemed to show that the true nature of any observable phenomenon lay in its most fundamental parts and, seeking to lay a scientific foundation for theories of religion, Durkheim must have been attracted to this pattern. This assumption is essentially aesthetic. What follows from it, though, are the hierarchies³ in search of "elementary forms" imposed on his subjects from the outset. They imply the following analogy:

primitive : modern :: elementary : complex

What is further suggested by this arrangement is the idea of a chronology, which indeed became crucial to the mythology of the primitive. If, as in atomic structures, the complex is derived from the elementary, modern societies must once have been like primitive ones, separated only by *progress*. Such an assumption is now considered unreasonable; it extends technological complexity to religious complexity and complexity in all other social aspects, which current anthropology does not support. Using this hierarchy, Durkheim extends what he learns in reports from natives in Australia to all systems more and equally complex: therefore *all systems*. The theory itself, a social functionalist model of religious life, continues to be discussed usefully. However Durkheim's attempt to provide an empirical foundation for it has lost credibility.

The theories of religion that Freud develops in *Totem and Taboo* are extensively fashioned on a similar chronological concept to that which Durkheim's work suggests. He extends the progression further into three categories, "three great pictures of the universe" situated in a psychological perspective rather than Durkheim's sociology:

³ I draw the language of "hierarchies" from Bruce Lincoln (Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 147), who in turn draws upon Lévi-Strauss.

animistic > religious > scientific⁴

Progress as the vehicle between these categories is emphasized. The primordial animistic is “the first to be created.”⁵ After that each successive stage represents a more disjointed, but more accurate reality less controlled by the “omnipotence of thoughts.”⁶ He goes on to associate the earlier stages of human development, the animistic and the religious, with psychosis among the mentally unwell. In so doing, he makes a statement that would have struck many as appalling in his day (as it would in ours); to link religion to psychosis rhetorically connects its tremendous taboo onto the former, the sacred.

With such a forceful statement, we recognize that Freud is participating very much in a debate of his time. It cannot be ignored that both Durkheim and Freud were nonreligious Jewish intellectuals; outsiders in a society that, while not for long, was still ostensibly Christian and, with the Dryfuss Affair in Durkheim’s France (which he publicly involved himself in) and the growing anti-semitic nationalist movements in Freud’s central Europe, considered both to be outsiders both for their irreligion and cultural Judaism. Religion treated neither of them well, and perhaps for this reason both may have been motivated to dismiss it wholesale with the primitives in tow. In any event, their personal reasons are here only speculation. It is quite clear, nevertheless, that the school of Durkheim and Freud places the religious at a lesser intrinsic value than the scientific, less “perfected” form of the same elementary matter.⁷ Such an assumption leads easily

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, translated by James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1950), 77.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁷ “scientific thought is only a more perfected form of religious thought.” Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 431.

to conclusions that are less than empirical. And as it happens, the primitive by opposition serves to reenforce the gospel of modern progress.

Recovering the Primitive (the primitive as Eden)

“The great civilization of the West has given birth to many marvels; but at what a cost!”⁸ writes Claude Lévi-Strauss, anthropologist and theorist of myth, in his *Tristes Tropiques*. “What travel has now to show us is the filth, *our* filth, that we have thrown in the face of humanity.” The Good News of progress does not strike all ears with the sound of triumph. Alongside the functionalist-reductionist, the early half of the twentieth century saw also a parallel movement within anthropology and the study of religion that was more inclined to the Romantic, and developed a rather different mythology of the primitive. On the whole, both groups share the same assumptions of chronology from primitive to modern and the atomic aesthetic in which the primitive is thought closer to what is fundamentally human than the modern. This second group however introduces a sense of deep discomfort with industrial society and looks to the apparently unblemished spirituality of the primitive as an escape to that which is more true, abandoning the “artificial.”

In the same text, Lévi-Strauss addresses the extremes possible in characterizing this point of view. “The study of these savages does not reveal a Utopian nature,”⁹ he writes. There is not any proposal that we return to huts and painted nakedness, abandon our cities, or run to the jungle en masse. On the contrary, modernity’s “inertia” was for Lévi-Strauss far too great, far too

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York, NY: Criterion Books, 1961), 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

immovable. He accepted it as a given and wrote to it. As the cultural critics have tended to suggest, it is the *pictures* of huts and painted nakedness (so vivid in Lévi-Strauss' volume) that are the real project at work. The primitive is revealed in and thoroughly subjectified in these exotic images. With an eye for the unusual, Lévi-Strauss and his colleagues contributed to a mythology of the primitive that was deeply respectful yet highly selective, and as such, bordering on the imaginary.

The work of Mircea Eliade, which has been as influential as it is controversial, directly confronts and forms the myth of the primitive, which he equates with the "archaic." Eliade shares with Lévi-Strauss an admiration for their subject. Contrast with modern life pervades and falls squarely into the distinction of sacred and profane:

It should be said at once that the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit. ... For our purpose it is enough to observe that desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies and that, in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, NY: Harvest, 1957), 13.

Eliade's sacred, in opposition to the modern profane, is characterized first of all by a pervading sense of mythical reality: "living at the heart of the *real*."¹¹ The chronology that emerges borrows from Edenic form. Christianity in comparison is a religion of "fallen man"¹² for its dependence on conscious faith, an incomplete substitute for the primitive's certainty. To Eliade's primitive, reality is grounded in the sacred spiritual.¹³ The primitive, equivalent to the archaic, is the symmetrical reverse to the post-religious modern man, who has "fallen" completely.¹⁴ Yet it is this completeness, drawn with inspiration from Eliade's picture of the archaic total reality, that binds the archaic with our future in the following correspondence:

1. archaic/primitive > 2. Christian, early modern > 3. post-religious

1. *full* archetype > 2. scattered archetype > 3. *fully* forgotten archetype

Bound by their common fullness, which is the goal of the post-religious that Eliade anticipates, the modern can look to the primitive with appreciation, for the primitive possesses that fullness which the modern now seeks.

The arrangement of Eliade's frameworks especially suggest the work of a heavy hand, especially in light of recent scholarship that has unveiled the politicized assumptions and

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. William R. Trask (New York, NY: Bollingen, 1954), 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 213.

questionable anthropology in his work.¹⁵ It is quite clear now that these findings are founded deeply upon modern debates and conceptions. For both Eliade and Lévi-Strauss, the motivation for exploring what is primitive begins at home; to get at the roots of humanness, they hope to expand the realm of the possible for their audience. Their elevation of the primitive is characteristically Romantic and participatory in a debate that has existed unresolved since the Enlightenment. Lévi-Strauss writes, “human beings ... never create *absolutely*: all they can do is to choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas ...”¹⁶ To bring home exotic pictures therefore, and to synthesize “archaic man,” is for these thinkers to give a gift of possibility. At the conclusion of one discussion, Eliade describes the meaning he imagines for his work with the following proposition:

Here the considerations of the historian of religions end. Here begins the realm of problems proper to the philosopher, the psychologist, and even the theologian.¹⁷

It appears easy nowadays, with hindsight, to apply the criticisms of recent postcolonial and deconstructionist theory to those thinkers who did not have the benefit of its stringency in their time. Nevertheless, this work does affect our reading of them, and offers warning that cannot be simply dismissed. With respect to the study of the primitive, the effect is especially

¹⁵ For Eliade's reliance on the rejected thinking of Lévy-Bruhl, see John A. Saliba, *'Homo Religiosus' in Mircea Eliade* (Leiden, 1976), esp. 121-125; for criticism of his anthropology, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. 1-23; for his political positions, see Robert S. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth* (SUNY Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 160.

¹⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 213.

unsettling. Rey Chow's "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" is a particularly useful example of the contemporary trends. For Chow, the desire to record, describe, admire, and preserve the primitive suggests an urge borne within industrial society to "hold onto an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own 'fake' experience."¹⁸ Modernity itself, founded upon a criticism of the past and the self-conscious movement from it, *consumes* the primitive to fuel its own growth. Noting the extent to which the work of the structuralists is placed in frameworks that reassert the progress of modernity, we are led down paths which orient their work with the imperialist project which the contemporary West now seeks to distance itself from. Regardless of present intention, though, imperialist ideology does not make good science. The hierarchies that result therefore and necessarily place the scholar on the top of a scale and his "opposite" at the bottom. A particular and ideological value judgment is thus perpetuated, which puts into severe doubt any empiricism that could be claimed for work founded on it. Between the two visions of the primitive, with Durkheim and Freud on one side, and Lévi-Strauss with Eliade on the other, comparable hierarchies underlie their work and guide their conclusions. All four did useful and influential work that continue to fuel discussion. But the nature of that discussion has necessarily changed; aware that their assumptions can no longer be justly held, a crucial rift separates the modern scholar from them.

One of Chow's more intriguing notions leads us into the more contemporary thinkers in religious studies and concerns the origin of the self-consciousness that is so central to modern awareness:

Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active 'gaze' subjugating the native as passive 'object,' I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native's gaze. This gaze, which is neither a

¹⁸ Rey Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), 141.

threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer ‘conscious’ of himself, leading to his need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth ‘reflected’ in the native-object.¹⁹

Post-Primitive (the primitive as mere other)

When Ludwig Wittgenstein read Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* in 1931, which was a motivating text for many of the thinkers we have discussed,²⁰ he couldn’t get through the first of thirteen volumes. Ray Monk, his biographer, writes:

The wealth of facts which Frazer had collected about these rituals would, Wittgenstein thought, be more instructive if they were presented without any kind of theoretical gloss and arranged in such a way that their relationships with each other – and with our own rituals – could be *shown*.²¹

From his frustration, Wittgenstein composed “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” a series of scattered notes that seek to expose the false claims of objectivity in Frazer’s methods of

¹⁹ Ibid., 139.

²⁰ Eliade learned English particularly in order to read it. This text was the most exhaustive example of the chronological theory of religious development.

²¹ Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1990), 311.

explanation. “All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does,”²² he notes. The sensation of discomfort with earlier explanatory frameworks that he here moves toward is exasperated today by the insights of Chow and her colleagues. Such subjective explanations as Wittgenstein chides, sensical only to a particular culture of understanding, created from their explanations a mythology that propelled the machines of cultural consumption to the detriment of the objectivity that they claim. In this light, the ideas of anthropologist Clifford Geertz come to be particularly useful. His methods are at their core very simple, in contrast to the extravagant syntheses of the structuralists. To understand a different cultural system, one must first complete what he calls “thick description”: an as-complete-as-possible survey of the meanings of symbols within the system, inclusive of ambiguity and evolving circumstances.²³ This portion is to be as “objective” as possible, a pragmatic lexicon free at first from translation into explanation. Unlike the earlier structuralists, Geertz’s “semiotic” approach keeps explanations at some distance from data, recognizing their subjectivity, their dependence on point of view, that enraged Wittgenstein. Here the hope for objectivity lies not in explanations so much as in the explication of symbols. The scholar-subject roles become more dynamic and complex, but the recognition of one’s point of view also simplifies one’s explanatory ambitions. In a discussion about Lévi-Strauss, Geertz notes a predicament from *Tristes Tropiques*, an ethnographic “uncertainty principle”:

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*, ed. Klagge and Nordmann (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 119.

²³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), esp. 3-32.

The anthropologist seems condemned either to journey among men whom he can understand precisely because his own culture has already contaminated them ... or among those who, not so contaminated, are for that reason largely unintelligible to him.”²⁴

While debilitating for Lévi-Strauss, Geertz simply accepts it, meanwhile assembling private theories from “particles and fragments of debris.” Theory is thus a subjective aid to understanding rather than static objectivity. The hierarchies that were assumed by Freud and Eliade are hereby deferred and other cultures, the primitives, can be met on a more even footing, perhaps freed somewhat from the impulse to consume. To the study of religion, Geertz represents a new beginning. But if Chow is correct, modernity must progress, and it must find something else to consume.

With such a separation established, I propose, it is possible and justifiable to reassume the earlier structuralist theories on a qualified basis. The qualification is that they no longer bring with them the mythological weight of their hierarchies. They are read, so divested, as fragments and useful propositions that in our newer “modern” we could not defensibly arrive at ourselves. For example, Freud’s association between the primitive and the insane may be unrepeatably by present polite usage and ethic, but it can nevertheless be useful. It depicts the tremendous barrier of *direct* incommunicability between the scholar and both the psychotic and the mystical, as well as suggesting means that have been useful for overcoming the barrier in psychology for application to the study of religious experience. In retrospect, we can also recognize that Durkheim’s theories still have a great deal of importance, despite his slew of now-rejected assumptions. It provides us a language for talking about religion in terms of society, and points out the close, even functional, relationship that exists between the two in many circumstances. Neither of these examples are read as hard science, though, as they were intended. Instead, become insights and recorded sensations, data rather than serious theory.

²⁴ Ibid., 350. From "The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss."

As modern scholars pick their forbearers apart, the elders become other, and even consumed, as the primitives did for them. Every generation must be fundamentally debased in order for modernity to continue. The difference between now and then is irreversible. They represent a *certainty* that we can no longer even imitate honestly in the further dislocation that the modern has bestowed and their work has become artifact, just as the primitives did. By continuing to study them, and their omnipotence assumed for their point of view, the present scholar sees again and again her own modernity reflected. This recalls Chow's notion of the native's reflected gaze. Within the small confines of the academy, this is a microcosmic reenactment of the mythologies of the primitive.

Coda (the primitive as now)

If you will permit me one last passage from the Lévi-Strauss, a life's work I have just finished qualifying, you may read as the fabric of what I have tried to do unweaves itself. With lethargy the past and other describes this present text, my honest method, as if it happened yesterday and he were I:

It was then that I began to learn how any problem, whether grave or trivial, could be resolved. The method never varies. First you establish the traditional 'two views' of the question. You then put forward a commonsense justification of the one, only to refute it by the other. Finally you send them both packing by the use of a third interpretation, in which both the others are shown to be equally unsatisfactory. Certain verbal maneuvers enable you, that is, to like up the traditional 'antitheses' as complementary aspects of a single reality: form and substance, content and container, appearance and reality, essence and existence, continuity and discontinuity, and so on. Before long the exercise becomes

the merest verbalizing, reflection gives place to a kind of superior punning, and the ‘accomplished philosopher’ may be recognized by the ingenuity with which he makes ever-bolder play with assonance, ambiguity, and the use of those words which sound alike and yet bear quite different meanings.²⁵

Such a moment of closeness with the other, of prophecy which expects my little deconstruction as fitting to its time and place, recalls Geertz’s assumption which underlies both his motivation and cause to hope for the study of humanity. The other is “not alien at all. The mind of man is, at bottom, everywhere the same.”²⁶

²⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 54.

²⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 350.

