

Andrew Lang's criticisms of Frazer, concerning the definition of religion

By Terence Rajivan Edward, v.1., 16th Nov 2023.

In his book *Magic and Religion*, Andrew Lang makes several criticisms of J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Below are some of them, only a small selection, "mainly" ones focused on Frazer's definition of religion and problems it gives rise to.

Unanswerable question. Lang regards Frazer's question of which came first, belief in magic or religion, as not scientifically unanswerable. A people with only magical beliefs may have given up on religion very quickly and cannot be assumed to have never reached the religious stage (pp.47-48).

Definition of religion. Lang criticizes Frazer's definition of religion as "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life." This excludes people with belief systems which suppose there is a creator of the world but who do not make sacrifices to that creator or pray to them. But we would call believers in this religious (p.48).

An explanatory gap. Frazer's scheme of development, from magic to religion to science, is unable to account for the kind of religion Lang draws attention to: belief in a powerful creator without sacrifices or prayers to this creator.

Coleridge and Australian tribes. Lang gives Coleridge as an example of someone who occupies this position, but also some of the Australian tribes as described by Frazer. Frazer is reliant on the "fact" that they don't pray to a supreme being (or rarely do) or make sacrifices and his faulty definition to argue that they are in the magical stage and do not have religion (p.49, 51).

European traces of religion? Frazer puts down some traces of religion to European influence and an aboriginal desire to please the white man. Lang finds this unlikely (p. 51).

Passover feast remote evidence. Frazer has a theory that the origin of the Passover was a rite in which masked men ran through Hebrew towns killing the first born of Israel. He supports this with evidence of a parallel rite in Australia. But he only has a remark that this was long ago and a story by an adult that he was an infant who escaped. The evidence is described as remote and in need of further corroboration (pp. 53-56).

Inconsistent source use. Frazer picks material from his sources which suit his theories but ignores other material which challenges or refutes these (p.55).

No sacrifice problem. By Frazer's definition, religion may involve prayer or sacrifice, but he sometimes discounts groups as religious who pray to a supreme being but don't sacrifice! The Dieri worship by prayer (p.63).

Magic and religion coexist. Frazer has a neat scheme in which magical thought gives way to

religion. Human magic is found to not work and people "therefore" attribute a superior power to a superior being. However, in various civilizations (Babylon, Egypt, Greece), strong belief in magic coexisted with religion (p.56).

Out of context. Frazer finds people who believe in magic where they should be moving to religion, given his theory and also people who believe in religion where the circumstances are more favourable for magic (p.62). Rain-making magic dominates in a parched Central Australian environment, where Frazer's theory predicts tribes would be forced to religion, whereas there are germs of religion in South-Eastern Australia he says, which would seem to reward such magic more (p.64).

Against stupidity implication. Frazer would seem to have to say that groups which cling to belief in human magic are stupid, resisting the evidence that would move them to the religious stage, but Lang says that the Arunta - Frazer's example of a purely magic-oriented tribe - are not stupid, given their metaphysics (p.65).

Reference

Lang, A. 1969 (originally 1901). *Magic and Religion*. New York: Greenwood Press.