

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES
TO THE OLD TESTAMENT: A REJOINDER

In his review of my book *Anthropology and the Old Testament* in *JASO* (Vol.X no.3, 1979), Paul Heelas noted that the book did not discuss whether anthropological theorising could be combined with theological approaches:

... the question remains whether some anthropological theories are not reductionist and therefore unacceptable. Bearing in mind the problems once faced by Robertson Smith, is there not today some tension between applying the ideas of Lévi-Strauss and writing for the 'Growing Points in Theology' series?

These are fair questions. I am grateful to Heelas for raising them, and to the editors of *JASO* for allowing me to attempt a reply.

The subject does not simply concern the relationship between anthropology and theology. There are differing approaches within theology itself, of which some would be more sympathetic to anthropological theorising than others. The question is also a part of the wider problem of the relation of theology to other disciplines, e.g. philosophy.

The most obvious reason why Old Testament scholars may wish to study anthropology is that the Old Testament records cultural activities that were not peculiar to the ancient Israelites. Sacrifice, divination, blood feud, magic, mourning rites, to name only some, are well attested in the Old Testament. Further, it contains much information of a genealogical nature. Granted that anthropologists make special studies of kinship systems, and of other types of behaviour found in many societies as well as in ancient Israel, it is not unreasonable for the Old Testament specialist to hope for some illumination from anthropological

studies. He may profit not only from the methods and approach of the anthropologist, but also from his theorising, especially if this is at variance with commonly accepted opinions within Old Testament study.

In some cases, Old Testament scholars have deliberately employed anthropological theorising in order to defend their theological evaluations of the Old Testament. In the latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, British Old Testament critical scholarship used the notion of development in order to reconcile the religious and moral crudities of parts of the Old Testament with its continued acceptance as holy scripture. The Old Testament was seen as the record of God's gradual education of the Israelite people from lower to higher views of ethics and of obligation to God. This liberal approach was in opposition to an orthodox conservative reading of the Old Testament, which would not accept that there had been any development in the Israelite understanding of God. It is not surprising therefore that some of the liberals made use of the developmentalist theories of Frazer and Tylor to support their case. But they went beyond Frazer and Tylor, and asserted that in ancient Israel a divine providence had been involved in the nation's cultural and religious development. Whether they had good theological grounds for assuming this operation of divine providence is open to doubt.

W. Robertson Smith is an outstanding example of a theologian who used anthropology to support his theological position. At the trial which led to his dismissal from his post at the Free Church Divinity College in Aberdeen in 1881, he was charged, among other things, with holding that the levitical laws were not instituted at the time of Moses.¹ The theological principle at issue was whether it was possible both to accept the Bible as authoritative for Christian belief, and to accept the account of the history of Israelite religion afforded by historical criticism, when the historical-critical account differed radically from the account in the Bible. Whereas the book of Leviticus stated plainly that Moses had instituted various propitiatory sacrifices, Smith accepted the historical-critical view of his time that propitiatory sacrifices in ancient Israel had been introduced long after the time of Moses. One of the aims of his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* of 1888-1889 was to show, on anthropological grounds, that the earliest form of Semitic sacrifice was a communion meal shared between a clan and its deity, and that propitiatory sacrifices were not part of the most primitive type of Israelite religion. The case rested partly upon the view that totemism was a primitive form of social and religious life common to all peoples.² Smith was concerned to discover what

¹ See T.O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*, Chicago 1974, p. 17.

² See J.W. Rogerson, 'W.R. Smith: Religion of the Saints', *Expository Times*, Vol. XC(1979), pp. 228-233.

was true about the development of Israelite sacrifice; but there was the theological implication that if he was correct, then his theological opponents were wrong, and needed to modify their views about the authority of the Bible.

An equally famous, and quite different use of anthropology for theological purposes was that of W. Schmidt and his Vienna school.³ The aim here was to show that there had been a universal primitive monotheism and morality, and that polytheism was a 'degeneration'. In theological terms, this was a Catholic use of anthropology to oppose theories of religious development that had been put forward by anthropologists and which had been accepted in critical Protestant circles, and applied to the Old Testament.

In the past twenty years, a renewed interest in anthropology on the part of Old Testament scholarship has come as a response to the writings of Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, Leach and Mary Douglas. In some cases, this was because these writers challenged assumptions that Old Testament scholarship had accepted from earlier phases of anthropology. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, the ancient Israelite was sometimes presented in Old Testament scholarship as a Lévy-Bruhl type of primitive who understood magic in Frazerian terms and whose worship was a Malinowski-type use of myth and ritual. Survivals of such viewpoints are not uncommon among first-year undergraduates studying the Old Testament. Not only has Old Testament scholarship learned from recent anthropology that it must re-assess its indebtedness to earlier anthropology; it has begun to learn from anthropology, rightly or wrongly, that ancient Israel's sacred traditions and social behaviour can be seen as a complex of symbols articulating Israelite perception and understanding of reality.

It is this particular use of anthropology in Old Testament studies, namely the use of what anthropology has suggested about traditions and behaviour as clusters of symbols, that seems to me to put Heelas's question about anthropology and theology at its sharpest. Part of the intellectual heritage of Lévi-Strauss is Saussurian linguistics, with its stress on the closed world of linguistic signs. How can theologians use anthropological theorising that assumes a closed and self-contained system of symbols, in order to support theological claims about the transcendent?

In fact, this question is a specific instance of a general problem that has concerned theology for a very long time - the problem of the meaning of religious language. In the present century, this problem became central with the insistence of logical positivists that religious language is meaningless insofar as it claims to make synthetic statements. While theology has not accepted the validity of everything propounded by logical positivists, there has been some recognition of the validity of the point that religious language does not make synthetic statements. Some recent theology has been concerned with story and metaphor, and with the claim that these may point beyond

³ Cf. W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (trans. H.J. Rose), London 1931.

themselves to the transcendent.⁴ It was for this reason that I concluded my contribution to a recently-published symposium on sacrifice by suggesting that whereas the anthropologist would look at the story of the institution of Old Testament sacrifice only in order to elucidate a coherent system of symbols, 'the theologian would concentrate upon sacrifice as seen in terms of the story (of its institution), and the insight into eternal reality which the story might contain'.⁵

My own approach to the Old Testament is basically phenomenological. The Old Testament contains, in my view, the religious witness of a smallish group of Israelites who preserved over a period of a thousand years the conviction that a god had chosen them, and was involved in the events of their history. The belief of this group was shared to a greater or smaller extent by the people as a whole, depending on the circumstances. It was partly institutionalised in worship and sacrifice, and it was articulated in religious traditions. As the Old Testament repeatedly shows, this belief of the minority provided a less satisfactory religion for the majority than the religions of neighbouring peoples. The majority turned repeatedly to these other religions, or adapted to them the belief of the Israelite minority.

The task of the theologian, as I see it, is not to treat the Old Testament as a set of ontological assertions about unseen reality. It is rather to seek to discover what the Israelite minority was claiming to believe. In this regard, the theologian's aim may not be so very different from that of the anthropologist who tries to describe the religion of a particular people. This being so, it is not surprising that the Old Testament scholar should study classical descriptions of religious beliefs by anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, Middleton, Geertz and Turner in order to profit from their methods and results. He will be aware that some anthropological theorising is reductionist - but then some theology has been reductionist also.

The Old Testament scholar as one who seeks to describe the religious witness contained in the Old Testament stops, and the theologian as articulator of a system of doctrine starts, at the point where it is accepted that the Old Testament witness of faith can become a basis for religious belief today, and the attempt is made to work out the implications of this acceptance. A scholar, may, of course, be attempting to describe the witness of faith in the Old Testament, and he may also in some sense have accepted this faith for himself. There is thus the danger, as in all description of religious beliefs, that the assumptions of the observer will prejudice his observations. At the very least, a closer liaison between anthropology and theology

⁴ See, for example, P. Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia*, Vol. IV (1975), pp. 29-148.

⁵ J.W. Rogerson, 'Sacrifice in the Old Testament', in M.F.C. Bourdillon & Meyer Fortes (eds.), *Sacrifice*, London: Academic Press 1980; p. 58.

may assist the theologian to be more conscious of his prejudices as he attempts to describe objectively the religious witness that the Old Testament contains. It will be interesting to see whether these observations go some way towards answering Heelas's questions.

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