Religion (1989) **19,** 41–61

WILLIAM ROBERTSON SMITH AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION[1]

Margit Warburg

This article discusses William Robertson Smith's significance to the study of religion in the light of some important themes in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Although rooted in an evolutionist frame of understanding which in Robertson Smith's case represented a particular theological variation, this work pointed forward to the functionalist theory of religion as a social phenomenon. Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice as a communion has been abandoned for more than half a century, but it is interesting in the way it draws upon the major, yet controversial source to early Semitic sacrifice, the *Narratio* ascribed to Nilus. The reasons for the contemporary view of the *Narratio* as an unreliable source are reviewed, and it is shown that Robertson Smith's use of the *Narratio* reflects his own preassumed model of religion. Robertson Smith does not stand alone with this model. On the contrary, the conformation of the *Narratio* of both past and present prejudices explains its popularity as a 'source' in the history of religions. A review of Robertson Smith's work and influence concludes that his significance is not so much due to specific achievements in the study of religion, but rather to his intuitive ability to grasp essential elements of religion.

It cannot be denied that William Robertson Smith is a major figure in the study of the history of religions. He laid the foundation of the work of so many successors that it is difficult to name any later scholar in comparative religion who has not been directly or indirectly influenced by Robertson Smith. Furthermore, his fundamental ideas on religion as a social phenomenon profoundly influenced several other fields within the humanities and social sciences.[2]

Robertson Smith's ideas, however, are not only interesting from a historical angle, but also because they raise important general questions in the study of religion. It is the purpose of this article to focus upon certain of Robertson Smith's theories and methods in the light of later criticism. Indeed, Robertson Smith has been criticised by a number of great scholars, but this criticism carries with it implications which have not been pointed out previously. Since these implications concern different themes rather than one single issue in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*,[3] I shall begin with a brief, general introduction to Robertson Smith's background for writing this *opus major* in comparative religion.

0048–721X/89/010041 + 21 $02.00/0

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF ROBERTSON SMITH[4]

Robertson Smith was born in 1846 in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, as the son of a minister in the conservative branch of the Scottish church, The Free Church. He was barely fifteen when he entered the University of Aberdeen, and in 1866 he was given a grant which allowed him to continue his studies at New College in Edinburgh. Here he combined the study of mathematics and physics with theology and the classics. He laid the foundation of his later career by studying classical Hebrew under professor A. B. Davidson (1831–1902) who had come to hold a controversial position in Scottish theology by taking the view that the Bible, like any other text, should be treated with critical philological methods.[5]

As a student Robertson Smith went to Germany and Holland several times where he came into contact with leading Biblical scholars belonging to the so-called higher criticism. Thus, during a stay in Göttingen in 1869 he came under the influence of the significant German theologian Albrecht Ritschl[6] (1822–1889). His views on the nature of religion had a profound influence on Robertson Smith who gradually acquired a more historical-critical and less dogmatic view of the scriptures of the Old Testament. In essence, this view was that the Bible was less a source of dogmatic propositions about God than a historical record of that state of mind which was inspired by the divine revelation. When Robertson Smith later forwarded this standpoint in the article 'Bible',[7] on which the notorious series of libels against him were to be based, there was no doubt that Ritschl's ideas were also on trial.[8]

After Robertson Smith took over the chair of Hebrew and Old Testament studies at the The Free Church College in Aberdeen in 1870 he maintained close relations with the scholars of the higher criticism in continental Europe and soon became its most outstanding representative in Great Britain. However, he detached himself from the more radical, naturalistic views advanced by some of the continental theologians, such as the Dutchman Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891).[9]

Besides Ritschl the theologian Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) became of the utmost importance to Robertson Smith's later work. In particular, Wellhausen's studies of Arabic traditional religion inspired Robertson Smith to emphasise the significance of the sacrificial meal in his theory of sacrifice.[10] But Robertson Smith was also influenced by non-theologians, such as Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), a specialist in early Arabic traditions, and the Semitic linguist and Islamic historian Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) which is evident, for example, from Robertson Smith's general view of the cultural homogeneity of the ancient Semites. Finally, it should be mentioned that during a second visit to Göttingen in 1872 he studied Arabic under the famous professor of Oriental languages, Paul de Lagarde (1827–1891).[11]

In consideration of Robertson Smith's rising international position it was obvious for the new progressive editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Professor T. S. Baynes, to ask Robertson Smith to write a couple of articles to the forthcoming ninth edition. In 1875 the second volume was issued containing among other things Robertson Smith's articles 'Angel' and 'Bible'. These two articles, in which he expressed his well-known views on the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible,[12] aroused a great stir, however, among leading fundamentalist theologians in The Free Church. This controversy resulted in the long series of libels, in which Robertson Smith was accused of defaming the holy scriptures because he had stated, among other things,[13]

(1) that the laws of Leviticus had not been fixed once and for all during the time of Moses,
(2) that Deuteronomy was not a simple account of historical facts, nor was it written during the time of Moses,
(3) that religious writers took their liberties and made errors in transcription like any other author or scholar.

Today, only few would consider these points of view controversial, but during the 1870's the Scottish church experienced a long series of internal struggles, and many—even among the more liberal theologians—regarded the work of Robertson Smith as a potential cause of further schisms.

The case against Robertson Smith reached a turning point in 1877 when his opponents succeeded in having him suspended from the university. In the following years Robertson Smith gave lectures all over the country, defending his points of view against 'the dogmatics'. Of more importance to his later work, however, was his two great travels to the Middle East in 1878–1880, each for a period of half a year. Since he mastered Arabic, he could talk with the local population and make his own observations.[14] Thus, unlike many other scholars of his time, he *personally* visited the countries and the cultures which were his objects of study.

Back in Scotland the campaign against Robertson Smith continued, and it was formally closed only in May 1881 with his ultimate dismissal as professor. He was then offered the position as editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and in the following seven to eight years he wrote more than two hundred articles to the encyclopaedia, mainly on Old Testament and Arabic topics.[15] In the same period he also completed four books, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church. Twelve Lectures on Biblical Criticism* from 1881, *The Prophets of Israel and Their Place in History to the Close of the Eighth Century B.C.* from 1882, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* from 1885, and *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites, First Series: The Fundamental Institutions* from 1889.[16]

In 1883 Robertson Smith accepted the Arabic chair at the University of Cambridge, and in 1886 he also became chief librarian there. At the same

time he kept his position as editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His enormous working capacity met these challenges brilliantly, but his health, which had always been poor, was further weakened. He died in 1894, only 48 years old.

LECTURES ON THE RELIGION OF THE SEMITES

Among Robertson Smith's many works *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* from 1889 has remained a classic. In this work Robertson Smith described his theories on the origin and development of what he called the early Semitic religion which he perceived as the roots of Judaism. Some of his thoughts, in particular on the Semitic sacrifices, had been forwarded earlier in his book, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church;*[17] however, in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* presented in his elegant and easily readable prose his epoch-making discussion of the relation between cult and myth appeared fully elaborated for the first time.

Characteristic of its time *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* stands as one long epic, where most of the sources are interpreted again and again from new angles. His theoretical considerations are brief and mainly given in the introductory chapter. The rest of the book is a detailed discussion of those elements of Semitic religion which according to Robertson Smith represented significant aspects of the religion in pre-Biblical, Semitic pastoral society.

It was Robertson Smith's aim with this work to illuminate the origin of Judaism and hence Christianity. Robertson Smith regarded Judaism, Chrisitianity and Islam as *positive* religions. They had been founded by great religious innovators who preached a divine revelation. The positive religions did not, however, appear *in vacuo*, but evolved on a background of more ancient, *unconscious* religious traditions which had been passed on from generation to generation (LRS, pp. 1–2).

ROBERTSON SMITH'S COMPARATIVE METHOD

At Robertson Smith's time science and the humanities were influenced by evolutionist theories, in particular in biology, history and social anthropology. Robertson Smith also had an evolutionist approach in his treatment of 'the great problem of the origins of the spiritual religion of the Bible'. (LRS, p. 2). The prime thesis of historical-anthropological evolutionism was that all human cultures had followed a parallel development towards a still higher cultural and moral stage. This conception implied the methodological assumption that it was possible to reconstruct older cultures by *comparative studies* of younger ones and thereby to reconstruct the common cultural foundation of all cultures. This reconstruction was to a great extent based on the identification of the so-called *survivals* in the younger cultures—a

concept introduced by the social anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917).

As the term implies survivals were defined as cultural phenomena which continued to exist even though their original meaning and function had disappeared with the society in which they originated. However, the weakness in using the identification of survivals as a scientific method is, among other things, that deciding whether something is a survival or not must be based on *a priori* suppositions of the direction and character of historical development. As a consequence the method easily leads to tautologies and/or becomes supported by prejudices.

Evolutionism as such has been heavily criticised for many years, and T. O. Beidelman, for example, has criticised Robertson Smith for his use of evolutionist ideas.[18] However, Beidelman does this in general terms only, and it appears that the specific problems in Robertson Smith's use of the comparative method had not yet been pointed out. Perhaps this is due to a lack of apprehension of Robertson Smith's rationale among his critics, since this can be understood only from his standpoint as a theologian. That he was first and foremost a Christian theologian is often underplayed in discussions of his influence on the history of religions, sociology of religion, and social anthropology.[19] I shall therefore demonstrate how his reasoning rested on theological premises, taking as an example a passage in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. The passage chosen concerns, to quote Robertson Smith, 'one of the most important things in ancient religion' (LRS, p. 140), which is the distinction between the *sacred* and the *secular*.

The sacred is first presented by empirical examples (LRS, pp. 142–152). Robertson Smith then introduces the Polynesian term *taboo* to describe the restrictions which were prescribed in the handling of sacred things and places. According to Robertson Smith all Semites had rules stating what was clean and what was unclean as well as rules stating what was sacred and what was secular. The distinction between these two sets of rules was mostly blurred, however, which Robertson Smith took as evidence of their common root in ancient concepts of taboo (LRS, p. 153). In order to explain how these rules of taboo could give rise to a true concept of holiness, Robertson Smith therefore had to distinguish between rules of taboo which point forward to 'religion proper' (LRS, p. 152), and rules of taboo which may be regarded as 'magical superstition' (LRS, p. 154),

> 'Thus alongside of taboos that exactly correspond to rules of holiness, protecting the inviolability of idols and sanctuaries, priests and chiefs, and generally of all persons and things pertaining to the gods and their worship, we find another kind of taboo which in the Semitic field has its parallel in rules of uncleanness.'
>
> (LRS, pp. 152–153)

Following the reasoning of Robertson Smith the rules concerning clean and unclean animals in Leviticus should be related to that category of rules of taboo which was denoted 'magical superstition'. However, these rules were *not* considered superstitious by Robertson Smith for the very reason that they appeared in the Bible. The rules have been brought 'within the sphere of divine ordinances, on the view that uncleanness is hateful to God and must be avoided by all that have to do with Him', as Robertson Smith put it (LRS, p. 153). Robertson Smith here clearly expressed his general view that an analysis of the Old Testament does not make sense unless it is based on an acceptance of the hand of a revealing God in history.[20] Thus, only when realising this theological premise can we understand the above statement as part of the argumentation for considering the Jewish dietary rules as survivals from the taboo-ridden past.[21]

Robertson Smith's distinction between the kind of taboos which pointed forward towards the sacred and the kind of taboos which did not, is expounded in a reasoning typical of the Victorian evolutionists,

> 'On the other hand, the fact that the Semites—or at least the northern Semites—distinguish between the holy and the unclean, marks a real advance above savagery. All taboos are inspired by awe of the supernatural, but there is a great *moral* difference between precautions against the invasion of mysterious hostile powers and precautions founded on respect for the prerogative of a friendly god. The former belong to magical superstition—the barrenest of all aberrations of the savage imagination—which, being founded only on fear, acts merely as a bar to progress and an impediment to the free use of nature by human energy and industry.'
>
> (LRS, p. 154, my italics)

In these sentences Robertson Smith presented—more explicitly than elsewhere—his general criterion for distinguishing between those religious phenomena, *in casu* the taboos, which held the seeds of the positive religions from that kind of phenomena which belonged to the superstitions of the savage past. The criterion was whether the phenomenon was derived from respect of the divinity, or whether it was based on fear of the supernatural. The nature of this distinction was purely moral.

RELIGION AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

A prevailing theme in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* was that religion in antiquity was not a matter of privacy but first of all a collective affair whose function was to sustain society,

> 'Religious nonconformity was an offence against the state; for if sacred tradition was tampered with the bases of society was undermined, and the favour of the gods was forfeited.'
>
> (LRS, p. 21)

Robertson Smith proceeded by emphasising that in Semitic pastoral society religion was part of an *organic* entity, namely a community consisting of men and gods together. The intrinsic solidarity and unity of society was the *raison d'être* of religion,

> 'There was no separation between the spheres of religion and of ordinary life. Every social act had a reference to the gods as well as to men, for the social body was not made up of men only, but of gods and men.'
>
> (LRS, p. 30)

> 'The principle that the fundamental conception of ancient religion is the solidarity of the gods and their worshippers as part of one organic society, carries with it important consequences, which I propose to examine in some detail, . . . a great part of what I shall have to say in the present lecture might be applied, with very trifling modifications, to the early religion of any other part of mankind.'
>
> (LRS, p. 32)

These two quotations expressed a concept of religion which clearly anticipated the functionalism of twentieth century anthropologists. At the same time Robertson Smith generalised his view of ancient Semitic pastoral religion to include all 'unconscious' religions. Robertson Smith's influence on Durkheim and the functionalists shall be treated later, and the following is concentrated on his theory of sacrifice, which he himself considered his most important achievement.

ROBERTSON SMITH'S THEORY OF SACRIFICE

Half the *Lectures of the Religion of the Semites* is devoted to Robertson Smith's discussion of the Semitic sacrifices, and although his theory is completely abandoned today, it exerted a great influence on many contemporary scholars, also outside the history of religions. In his theory of psychoanalysis, for example, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) interpreted Robertson Smith's discussion of the supposed totemistic origin of the sacrificial meal as evidence of a primordial Oedipal disaster: the sons, envious of their father's dominance in the horde, killed him jointly to get access to the women. This event is 'repeated' in the eating of the totem animal (the father) in the sacrificial meal.[22] Freud's interpretation, however, deserves to be mentioned for its popularity rather than for its scientific seriousness in the study of religion.[23]

Evidently, the central source of Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice was Leviticus which contains detailed descriptions of the various rituals prescribed for the Judaic sacrificial acts. These rituals were performed by the professional priests of the second temple of Jerusalem, but Robertson Smith emphasised that the rituals rested upon an older religious practice going back to a time when lay participation in ritual acts was prevalent (LRS, pp. 215–216).

Among the types of sacrifices described in Leviticus, Robertson Smith concentrated on the common sacrificial slaughter (*zébaḥ*) in which the flesh was eaten while the fat and entrails were burnt. According to Robertson Smith the essence of this ritual was the communal sacrificial meal (LRS, pp. 238–239), and—following Wellhausen closely[24]—he interpreted it as the establishment of a communion between men and the deity (LRS, p. 240).

The sacrificial meal was, in fact, to become the pivot in Robertson Smith's theory of Semitic sacrifice. It is well-known that his theory drew heavily on the so-called Nilus account of a camel sacrifice, and in the following I shall draw attention to some hitherto unnoticed aspects of Robertson Smith's use of the Nilus account.

Inspired by Julius Wellhausen Robertson Smith used the camel sacrifice as comparative evidence for his general communion theory of the Semitic sacrifice. Robertson Smith quoted the central passages of the Nilus account as follows,

> 'Of all Semitic sacrifices those of the Arabs have the rudest and most visibly primitive character; and among the Arabs, where there was no complicated fire-ceremony at the altar, the sacramental meal stands out in full relief as the very essence of the ritual. Now, in the oldest known form of Arabian sacrifice, as described by Nilus, the camel chosen as the victim is bound upon a rude altar of stones piled together, and when the leader of the band has thrice led the worshippers round the altar in a solemn procession accompanied with chants, he inflicts the first wound, while the last words of the hymn are still upon the lips of the congregation, and in all haste drinks of the blood that gushes forth. Forthwith the whole company fall on the victim with their swords, hacking off pieces of the quivering flesh and devouring them raw with such wild haste, that in the short interval between the rise of the day star which marked the hour for the service to begin, and the disappearance of its rays before the rising sun, the entire camel, body and bones, skin, blood and entrails, is wholly devoured.[1]
>
> [1]This must not be regarded as incredible. According to Artemidorus, *ap.* Strabo, xvi. 4. 17, the Troglodytes ate the bones and skin as well as the flesh of cattle.'
>
> (LRS, p. 338)

According to Robertson Smith (LRS, p. 339) the essential parts of this ritual were,

(1) that the blood was spilt on consecrated ground, whereby it could be transferred to the god,
(2) that the blood and the flesh of the animal were eaten by the clan members and thereby incorporated into *their* blood and flesh.

The common meal consecrated the unity between man and god. Robertson Smith assumed that this deity was originally the clan's own god, the totem[25] but he acknowledged that there was no direct evidence of this in the sources

(LRS, p. 275).[26] He explained this by suggesting that the bedouins in the Nilus account—whom he called 'Saracens'—had ceased to sacrifice to their own clan deity in favour of the all-Arabic deity, the morning star (LRS, p. 282).[27] Unfortunately, Robertson Smith could not find any direct evidence of a previous symbolic kinship between the Saracens and the camel (LRS, p. 286); yet he maintained that the many restrictions that the Saracens imposed on the killing of camels must be interpreted as a blood tie between them. This blood tie—or kinship—between a clan and a particular animal was the pivotal idea in totemism (LRS, pp. 286–287). By sacrificing a member of the clan, namely the totem animal, the desired communion was established (LRS, p. 360).

Although Robertson Smith's communion theory appeared to be an improvement of Tylor's gift theory from 1871,[28] it soon came under attack and is generally abandoned today. Particularly, Biblical scholars have criticised his (and Wellhausen's) idea of the sacrificial meal as a joyous and happy clan feast (LRS, pp. 260–263); this interpretation, as stated in a modern Old Testament study, 'does not allow sufficiently for the element of solemnity in the early cult'.[29] The very idea of a communion was already attacked in 1912 by the British classical scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison. She showed that Robertson Smith's prejudices concerning the sacred complicated his interpretation unnecessarily, because he introduced a hypothetical and invisible deity as a third part in the sacrificial meal. She proposed a more simple interpretation instead, namely that the sacrificial meal involved the transfer of *mana* from the slaughtered animal to the participants in the cult.[30]

Despite this criticism Robertson Smith's communion theory is of significant interest in the history of research, because it inspired no less than three scholarly traditions, represented by Frazer (in social anthropology),[31] Durkheim (in sociology of religion) and by Freud (in psychoanalysis), respectively. Freud's use of Robertson Smith's theory has been briefly touched upon, and Robertson Smith's significance to Durkheim's outstanding work in the study of religion, will be dealt with later. Before that, however, I shall revert to the Nilus account of the camel sacrifice which was quoted above. As will appear from the following analysis, Robertson Smith's use of this source in his theory of sacrifice and the criticism raised against it shed important light on a certain fundamental conception of religion.

ROBERTSON SMITH AND THE NILUS ACCOUNT

The most comprehensive criticism of Robertson Smith's use of the Nilus account is found in Joseph Henninger's 'Ist der sogenannte Nilus-Bericht eine brauchbare religionsgeschichtliche Quelle?' from 1955,[32] the main points of which are summarised below. This leads to a discussion of the great scholarly significance of the Nilus account, which forms a marked contrast to its doubtful value as a historical source.

Henninger's first point of criticism concerns the authorship of the account, the so-called *Narratio*.[33] He cites earlier critical reviews by Karl Heussi concluding that the author cannot be the fourth century eremitic monk Nilus from Sinai, to whom the authorship of the text was usually ascribed. The Nilus who lived from the end of the fourth century to the middle of the fifth century was actually head of a monastery in Galatia, and there is no evidence of his staying in a monastery in Sinai. The dating of the text is also doubtful; Robertson Smith wrote that it was a late fourth-century source (LRS, p. 281), while Henninger concludes that the account must be younger, from the fifth or sixth century, and that the author was an unknown monk who used Nilus' name as a pseudonym.[34]

This criticism concerning the origin of the Nilus account does not necessarily disprove the authenticity of the description of the camel sacrifice—the unknown 'pseudo-Nilus' might still be a reliable observer. However, the camel sacrifice occupies only a minor part of the complete account. It is summarised briefly in the following.[35]

The monk, who calls himself Nilus, has retired to live in a monastery in Sinai together with his son, Theodulos. One day the bedouins take the monastery by storm, kill the monks and take Theodulos as prisoner. A terrible destiny is awaiting him, because the bedouins are cannibals and sacrifice young men to the morning star. Occasionally, however, the human sacrifice is substituted by a camel sacrifice which is performed as described by Robertson Smith and paraphrased above. Now, the most fortunate thing happens: the very morning when Theodulos is going to be sacrificed the barbarians oversleep, and as the sacrifice may be performed only when Venus still lights up the morning sky, Theodulos avoids death this time. Instead, he is sold as a slave, and after many tribulations, where he is exposed to hardships such as eating unclean food and dallying with women, he finally returns to the monastery in a happy reunion with his father.

Henninger credits Heussi for observing that this account has indeed the character of a novel, and he notes the typical Greek theme of the hero or heroine whose grim destiny is awaiting but who is saved by a miracle.[36] Henninger states correctly, however, that although a literary critique leads to a rejection of the authenticity of the account, we might still trust the ethnographical details which pseudo-Nilus has put into the story.[37]

From an ethnographical point of view, however, the description of the camel sacrifice is open to severe objections. Henninger concludes that it seems unlikely that the camel sacrifice was performed in the presence of the captives, and the description can therefore not be considered a first-hand source.[38] Furthermore, pseudo-Nilus presumably did not understand the language of the bedouins, because the monks feared the bedouins and had very little contact with them.[39] Finally, the whole description deviates con-

siderably in detail from what is known from other available sources on the life of the Arabian nomads of that time. Henninger particularly draws attention to the following points,

(1) Nowhere in the ethnographical literature is it possible to find evidence suggesting that the sacrificial animal should be placed on stones, in particular not on 'stones piled together' as Robertson Smith stated independently of the Greek text. Stones do have religious significance but this is not the same as using them as an 'altar'. On the other hand, stone altars are described in the Old Testament which pseudo-Nilus knew well, of course.[40]

(2) There is no indication in other sources of the substitution of a camel sacrifice for a human sacrifice which is in fact also disputed by Robertson Smith.[41] Camel sacrifices were probably common at that time, however.[42]

(3) In the description a leader of the ceremony appears. He introduces the hymn, leads the circumambulation and kills the animal. Such a priestly person does not fit with other facts about bedouin life; the closest parallel is the seers who guarded the holy places of the oases. These *sadana* lived permanently in the oases and did not migrate with the nomads. On the other hand, priests were common in ancient Greece and Israel.[43]

(4) The 'hymn' also appears unlikely, as hymns are unknown in ancient Arabian cult, but common in temple cults.[44]

(5) In the sacrifices of that time it was usual to let the blood pour into a hollow in the ground and not to drink it. When Robertson Smith emphasised the significance of drinking the blood of the sacrificial animal in order to strengthen the ties of kinship between man and animal (LRS, pp. 312–314), he could produce no other sources than the Nilus account in support of this statement.[45]

In conclusion, Henninger finds that there are weighty reasons to doubt that pseudo-Nilus has had any personal knowledge of bedouin life.[46] The description of the camel sacrifice is inconsistent with other sources on many important points. On the basis of this and the fact that the story reads like a novel, Henninger concludes that the Nilus account is useless as a source for the study of Semitic religion.[47] This implies that practically all that was supposed to substantiate Robertson Smith's theory on the totemistic communion sacrifice must be rejected.

It may be argued that nobody accepts Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice today, and that Henninger's criticism is mainly interesting from a historical point of view. However, I want to suggest that the most interesting aspect of this criticism of the Nilus account is not the rejection of its value as a

source for the study of religion—after all, George Foucart brushed it aside as an 'anecdote' as early as in 1912.[48] No, the most interesting aspect of the Nilus account is that belief in its credibility as a reliable source has died incredibly hard. At a first glance the text appears trustworthy, paradoxically enough because of—and not despite of—the fact that it tells us more about the author and his time than of the ethnographical details which it pretends to relate. The author does not for a moment doubt that these nomads were barbarians and in all respects lived a barbarian life: as rude savages they did not boil, fry or smoke their meat but ate it raw. They often practised cannibalism, they had no division of labour, no crafts, no trade and earned their living by the sword. They drifted around in hordes, killed the animals on their way and lived, in brief, 'like dogs'.[49]

Robertson Smith saw no reason to dispute this glorious picture of the barbarians; he rather supplemented it by stating, for example, that the Arabian sacrifices 'have the rudest and most visibly primitive character' (LRS, p. 338). That Wellhausen[50] and Robertson Smith accepted the Nilus account is explainable, considering the general late nineteenth century view of non-European cultures. It is interesting, however, that posterity has not felt compelled to dissociate itself from that picture of Arabian nomads which the Nilus account presents. As emphasised by Eliade in his commentary on Nilus' camel and twentieth century man, the tale suits *us* quite as well as it suited both Robertson Smith and pseudo-Nilus.[51]

The Nilus account and its success express more than just contemporary fascination of our barbarous past, it also tells us something about what pseudo-Nilus and Robertson Smith understood by religion. When pseudo-Nilus (or was it a different Nilus altogether?) is to describe the religious life of these barbarians he must introduce concepts and cult items which enable his readers to understand that we are talking about *religion.* And to Nilus religion has to do with an altar, a priest, a hymn and the circumambulating crowd—because to Nilus religion is cognitively a Hellenistic and Judaic (later Christian) phenomenon.

Nilus, or whatever his name was, does not stand alone with his difficulties in thinking the alien into a well-known pattern. As researchers of religion we also encounter descriptions of religions today in which gods, souls, prayers, meditation, magic, sin, altars and spirits appear in a hotchpotch—and this evidently characterises the author's cultural structuring rather than that of the people described. But our own superior attitude should not lead us to forget that in the future *our* use of established concepts, like cult and myth, may well be likewise criticised.

We may thus conclude that Nilus' account is not only a model of European thinking of 'the others' (cf. Eliade's interpretation above) but also a model of European thinking of religion, because it is based on the Judaic–Hellenistic

concept of religion. Furthermore, the Nilus account was a model for Robertson Smith and his time in their view of the development of 'civilisation'. It is, indeed, a morally devotional myth of origin showing how we were once barbarians and how elevated we have become since then. It was particularly important for Robertson Smith that the Nilus account demonstrated the inferior stage of the original religion so that it may be understood how sophisticated the Christian concept of divinity really is.

In conclusion, the Nilus account can be regarded as a model at several levels which makes it possible to solve the contradiction inherent in the tale of the camel sacrifice. It is, in fact, surprising that Nilus discovered priests, hymns and circumambulating worshippers among these horrible barbarians, and that Robertson Smith in addition found that they had erected an altar. Considering the savage and inferior stage of the Saracens on the ladder of culture, it would perhaps have been more appropriate to ascribe to them a form of religion which was more different from that of the later, more civilised time. But this was unthinkable; when Robertson Smith had to think religion, even of the most primordial type, all these elements and an invisible deity *had* to be present during the cultic act. Consequently, the cult of the barbarians was made into a temple cult, with only the building itself missing.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULT AND MYTH

Robertson Smith's most decisive contribution to the study of religion is without doubt his discussion of the relationship between cult and myth. As the first scholar he saw the cult as primary in relation to the myth in the religions of antiquity.[52] This thesis, which he formulated and substantiated on a few pages in *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, was revolutionary among the scholars of religion of his time. With their background in a Christian theological tradition it was obvious to them that the religious acts—the rituals—were inferior to faith—the myths—also when the religions of the past were considered. Until Robertson Smith's time, therefore, the study of religion had primarily focused on the interpretation of myths (LRS, p. 16).

Robertson Smith repudiated the strong emphasis upon myth by stating that in the religions of antiquity the myths did not have the character of dogmas, which the worshippers were obliged to believe—the obligatory part was to perform the ritual acts as meticulously as prescribed in the religious traditions (LRS, pp. 17–18). The myths, which were accessory to the rituals and served as explanations of the origin or particular performance of the ritual, were not fixed but often varied.[53] In a given society it was possible, therefore, to find many examples of different, sometimes even contradictory, mythical explanations of the same ritual act. Consequently, Robertson Smith stated as a main rule that in antiquity it was the religious practice which constituted the firm and most invariable part of religion (LRS, p. 16).

Robertson Smith forwarded this view with convincing clarity, although without any detailed empirical substantiation. He then proceeded to formulate the theoretical basis of his subsequent analysis of original Semitic religion,

> '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.'
>
> (LRS, p. 18)

This view on the relationship between cult and myth has since then been one of the analytical pillars of comparative religion. In his book on Aztec religion, *Teotl and *Ixiptlatli*, the newly retired Danish professor of sociology of religion, Arild Hvidtfeldt, discussed Robertson Smith's treatment of cult and myth and concluded that most scholars have accepted Robertson Smith's approach of considering the cult primary in relation to the myth.[54] Hvidtfeldt noted, however, that this general acceptance has not been substantiated by further theoretical arguments but appears to be founded on the fact that Robertson Smith's approach has proven its value in its application on a large number of empirical cases.

Hvidtfeldt primarily regarded and used Robertson Smith's discussion of cult and myth as a methodological principle and stressed that Robertson Smith himself considered it as 'the method of our investigation'.[55] Hvidtfeldt, however, moved beyond that. He used the primacy of the cult as the key element in a general model in comparative religion.[56] This model is more or less implicit in the wordings of Robertson Smith and can be formulated as a model composed of the following two theses,

(1) The rituals are the oldest and most permanent part of religion, while the myths are the variable derived from the ritual.
(2) The worshippers themselves consider the myth as less important than the rituals.

With regard to the first thesis one may say, with Hvidtfeldt, that the question of which is oldest, the myth or the ritual, is comparable to the hen-and-egg discussion.[57] There is no way of retrieving a meaningful answer to this question.

The second thesis, which obviously infuriated many theologians, was formulated by Robertson Smith as follows,

> 'In ancient Greece, for example, certain things were done at a temple, and people were agreed that it would be impious not to do them. But if you had asked why they were done, you would probably have had several mutually contradictory explanations from different persons, and no one would have thought

> it a matter of the least religious importance which of these you chose to adopt. Indeed, the explanations offered would not have been of a kind to stir any strong feeling; . . . '
>
> (LRS, pp. 16–17)

This quotation is, however, just a statement without proof, and Robertson Smith actually never seems to have given any proof of it. He only concluded that 'mythology was no essential part of ancient religion, for it had no sacred sanction and no binding force of the worshippers' (LRS, p. 17).

This second thesis has also been attacked by non-theologians, for example as early as in 1912 by Jane Ellen Harrison who wrote,

> 'To Robertson Smith a myth was the ancient equivalent of that hated thing, a dogma, only unguarded by sanctions. Had it been granted him to tarry awhile among the Iowa Indians or among the Zuñis he would have told another tale. An Iowa Indian when asked about the myths and traditions of his tribe said . . . :
>
> > These are sacred things and I do not like to speak about them, and it is not our custom to do so except when we make a feast and collect the people and use the sacred pipe.'[58]

It seems reasonable to conclude that the burden of proof of the second thesis lies with Robertson Smith. He has not produced such a proof which does not, of course, mean that the thesis is necessarily wrong.

DURKHEIM AND ROBERTSON SMITH

The inspiration from Robertson Smith had the most epoch-making effect on the study of religion through the work of Émile Durkheim. In 1895 Durkheim first became acquainted with the work of Robertson Smith,[59] and this led Durkheim to undertake a radical re-evaluation of his own attempts of treating religion from a sociological point of view.[60]

Durkheim's *opus major* in the sociology of religion, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* from 1912, is permeated by Robertson Smith's principal ideas that the gods are part of society, and that the foundations of early religion are the rites symbolising the mutual solidarity of gods and men in an organic community.

Apart from the sociological view of religion Durkheim also borrowed Robertson Smith's now abandoned thesis that totemism was a general, initial stage in the development of religion in all cultures.[61] Durkheim's interpretation of totemism deviated at one point, however, from that of Robertson Smith. While Robertson Smith assumed the existence of 'deities' right from the beginning of the history of mankind, Durkheim was of the opinion that in this early phase the clan worshipped the clan deity which was the totem, and that the clan therefore worshipped itself.[62] Durkheim was thereby able to circumvent the problem of assuming the existence of independent deities in his theory.

THE HEIRS OF DURKHEIM AND THE CRITICISM FROM EVANS-PRITCHARD

As stated above, Robertson Smith basically saw religion as a social phenomenon where both gods and men were part of an organic entity, and he considered the unity and maintenance of society as the core of religion. These views were accepted and continued by the functionalist anthropologists, from Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) in the 1920's to their successors several decades later.

In 1935, however, Malinowski dissociated himself from Durkheim's 'simple formula that God is society',[63] and in 1956 Evans-Pritchard raised a fundamental criticism of Durkheim's sociologistic concept of religion. Evans-Pritchard saw it as 'sociological metaphysics' to postulate that early human societies worshipped themselves, symbolised by the totem.[64] It was Durkheim, not the particular societies themselves, who made society into a deity. In continuation of Evans-Pritchard's argumentation it can be stated that although Durkheim had avoided the metaphysical element of Robertson Smith's theory, namely the postulated existence of a clan deity, this did not make Durkheim's theory less metaphysical. It is just as metaphysical to reject the existence of deities as it is to accept them.

In addition to this, Evans-Pritchard criticised Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice for not reflecting the intrinsic ideas of early society,

> 'The most damning case against Smith's theory of a communion-sacrifice rests, however, on the reasoning that if all primitive sacrifices have the same features and the most fundamental of these is the *idea* of communion, then he should have shown that primitive peoples do, in fact, *have that idea* and that it predominates. He does not do this. He cannot do this.'[65]

This quotation is interesting, though not because Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice is rejected. This had been done on several previous occasions, yet usually on its own premises. What is particularly interesting is that Evans-Pritchard rejected the theory by claiming that religion should primarily be understood and interpreted in terms of the indigenous categories of the particular culture under study. To Evans-Pritchard and many other social anthropologists, such as Godfrey Lienhardt, Franz Steiner, Edmund Leach, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, it became quite as important to analyse what people think as what they do. This should not, of course, be seen as a token of an individualistic understanding of religion but rather as an interest in uncovering conscious as well as unconscious collective concepts and symbols.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the beginning of this paper, it cannot be denied that William Robertson Smith is a major figure in the comparative study of religion. His

greatness is unanimously agreed upon, and at some time or other of their career most researchers of religion have had to evaluate his significance to their own field of research. This is remarkable, considering the fact that the majority of the specific results of Robertson Smith's work on Semitic religion soon proved to be untenable. His major theoretical contribution to the study of religion—his theory of sacrifice—has been widely rejected, both as a specific theory in the Semitic field and as a general theory in the history of religions.

What remains today is his thesis that the cult is permanent while the myth is variable. That has had the most profound significance to later research in the history of religions and social anthropology. Irrespective of the significance of his thesis, it seems unlikely, however, that this alone is the reason for acknowledging Robertson Smith's outstanding position in the history of religious studies.

It may thus be assumed that what has caused Robertson Smith's greatness is not the validity of his theories, because most of the time he erred. It is possible, though, to err at several levels of creative originality. Robertson Smith's significance shows itself in the fact that his errors ruptured established frames and led to new insight. Robertson Smith worked with something essential in what we call religion, and he had the calibre to treat the subject in a way which made the unthinkable thinkable.

To put it another way, William Robertson Smith was an original scholar because he summarised and represented the trends of his time, while at the same time being opposed to and transcending them. This qualifies him to his pedestal in the history of research, because researchers will never finish reflecting upon such a scholar's work. Once more it has been possible to go back to the Nilus account and to Robertson Smith's use of it to discover that it tells us something important about the ways in which we think about 'barbarians', 'civilisation', and 'religion', both in Robertson Smith's and in our own time. Therefore, William Robertson Smith's contributions to the study of religion grasp an essence of the field which means that also in the future it will be fruitful to return to his work.

NOTES

1 Part of this paper was presented at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Comparative Religion, 28 January 1987. The general ideas have been presented in Danish only, in M. Warburg, 'Robertson Smith—Fixpunkt og innovator i religionssociologien', in T. Tybjerg (ed.), *Religionssociologiske Perspektiver, Chaos. Dansk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier* (special issue), Copenhagen, 1985, pp. 9–34.

2 For example, the following two works review the significance of Robertson Smith in social anthropology: T. O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1974, and

R. A. Jones, 'Robertson Smith and James Frazer on Religion. Two Traditions in British Social Anthropology', in G. W. Stocking, Jr (ed.), *Functionalism Historicized. Essays on British Social Anthropology*, History of Anthropology, vol. 2, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, pp. 31–58. In ecclesiastical history Robertson Smith and the Victorian Scottish theologians have recently been treated in R. A. Riesen, *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland. A. B. Davidson, William Robertson Smith and George Adam Smith*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1985.

3 W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. The Fundamental Institutions*, Edinburgh, Adam and Charles Black 1889. A second edition was published in 1894 and a third edition in 1927. The third edition was reprinted with a prolegomenon by J. Muilenberg, New York, KTAV Publishing House 1969. All references to this work in the following are abbreviated LRS and refer to the 1969 edition.

4 A very detailed, although slightly uncritical source for Robertson Smith's position in contemporary scholarship is J. S. Black and G. Crystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith*, London, Adam and Charles Black 1912.

5 Black and Crystal, p. 77.

6 Ibid., p. 111.

7 Ibid., pp. 179–180.

8 Ibid., p. 247.

9 In general, Robertson Smith's theological position among the scholars of 'higher criticism' was cautious, if not conservative. See Riesen, pp. 115–119.

10 J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, drittes Heft, *Reste arabische Heidentumes*, Berlin, Georg Reimer Verlag 1887, pp. 119–123. See also Robertson Smith's own introduction to LRS, pp. xvi–xvii.

11 Black and Crystal, pp. 146–148.

12 Ibid., pp. 126–129.

13 Ibid., pp. 242–243.

14 Ibid., pp. 302–313, 333–337.

15 Ibid., p. 455.

16 A complete bibliography of Robertson Smith is given in Black and Crystal, pp. 621–628.

17 W. R. Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church: Twelve Lectures on Biblical Criticism*, Edinburgh, Adam and Charles Black, 1881, 2nd revised edn, 1892.

18 Beidelman, pp. 38–39.

19 A characteristic example is found in Robert Nisbet's introduction to Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The sociologist Nisbet, who was professor in humanities at Colombia University, wrote, 'Apparently it was about this time that Durkheim encountered the works of the English *ethnologist* Robertson Smith whose studies of the religions of the ancient Semites, among other works, had led him to the conclusion that the origins of religion are to be found, not in belief in spirits, in animism or other state of mind, but, rather, in the *social act*, in the rite or ceremony that symbolically binds the individual to his kinship community.' (E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 2nd edn, 1976, p. vi. First italics are mine.)

20 Riesen, p. 124.

21 Beidelman alludes to the same, but in general terms only, by the statement, 'Evolution makes sense if one believes, as Smith did, in a chosen people for whom truths were slowly revealed over a long period of history.' (Beidelman, p. 38.)

22 S. Freud, *Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenlebe der Wilden und der Neurotiker* [1913], in *Gesammelte Werke. Chronologisch geordnet*, 3rd edn, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag 1961, Band 9, pp. 160–186.
23 Cf. M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions. Essays in Comparative Religion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1976, pp. 3–5.
24 Wellhausen, p. 122.
25 It is well known that Robertson Smith was much influenced by his friend, J. F. McLennan (1827–1881), from whom he accepted the presumptions that mother-right was an earlier stage than father-right (cf., e.g. LRS, p. 278), and that totemism was an early religious phase through which all societies had to pass (cf., e.g. LRS, p. 124). Although these hypotheses on mother-right and totemism were forwarded earlier by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), Lewis H. Morgan (1818–1881) and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), it was especially McLennan's influence which was important to Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice, cf. Beidelman, p. 30. A specific example in the Semitic field is Robertson Smith's comparative analysis of the nature of the Arabic demon, *jinn* (LRS, pp. 119–134). He concluded from this analysis that it corroborated the hypothesis that the Semites also passed through the totemistic stage and that some of their deities were of totemistic origin (LRS, pp. 137–138).
26 It is noteworthy that Wellhausen was aware of Robertson Smith's hypothesis of an early totemistic stage in Semitic religion. However, Wellhausen found the hypothesis unproven and did not accept it in his own discussion of the nature of the Arabic pre-Islamic deities (Wellhausen, pp. 176–178).
27 Cf. Wellhausen, pp. 36–40.
28 Robertson Smith's own criticism of Tylor's gift theory is found in LRS, p. 392.
29 R. J. Thompson, *Penitence and Sacrifice in Early Israel outside the Levitical Law*, Leiden, E. J. Brill 1963, p. 12. Thompson classifies all Old Testament references to sacrifice in groups according to the presence or absence of an element of 'sin' or 'solemnity' in the sacrificial description. He concludes that there is an overweight (2:1) of references reflecting a sense of sin or solemnity which should 'suggest the probability of an earlier connection between sin and sacrifice than Wellhausen allowed' (Ibid., p. 243).
30 J. E. Harrison, *Themis. A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* [1912], London, Merlin Press 1963, 2nd edn, p. 136.
31 A recent systematic analysis of the relationship between Frazer and Robertson Smith is given by Jones, cf. note 2. Robertson Smith's influence on Frazer who became his friend is also treated by R. Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer. His Life and Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1987, pp. 58–63, 82–85, 228–233. Despite their mutual inspiration and close personal friendship their views differed still more from each other; for example, Frazer immediately adopted Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice but later gradually abandoned it (Ackerman, pp. 229–230).
32 J. Henninger, 'Ist der sogenannte Nilus-Bericht eine brauchbare religionsgeschichtliche Quelle?', *Anthropos* Band 50 (1955), pp. 81–148.
33 Ibid., pp. 88–94.
34 Ibid., p. 94.
35 The summary is based on Henninger's extracts of the *Narratio*.
36 Henninger, pp. 95–96.
37 Ibid., pp. 96–97.
38 Ibid., p. 97.

39 Ibid., pp. 97–98.
40 Ibid., pp. 108–109.
41 Robertson Smith discussed in detail the claim that a camel might substitute a human victim. He did not agree on substitution as such but concluded from the totemistic principle of kinship between humans and animals that the camel sacrifice was the oldest (LRS, pp. 262–265).
42 Henninger, pp. 116–117.
43 Ibid., pp. 119–121.
44 Ibid., p. 123.
45 Ibid., pp. 123–125.
46 Ibid., pp. 144–147.
47 Ibid., pp. 147–148.
48 G. Foucart, *Histoire des religions et méthode comparative*, Paris, Librairie Alphonse Picard et Fils 1912, p. 132.
49 Henninger, pp. 126–127.
50 Wellhausen, p. 37.
51 Eliade, p. 7.
52 It is beyond doubt that the theory of the primacy of ritual over myth is Robertson Smith's original idea. Before Robertson Smith the German folklorist, Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–1880), had emphasised religious practice rather than religious ideas in his works, of which the most significant was *Wald- und Feldkulte* from 1875–1877 (W. Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte, Erster Teil, Der Baumkultus der Germanen und ihrer Nachbarstämme, Mythologische Untersuchungen*, Berlin, Gebrüder Borntraeger 1875. *Wald- und Feldkulte, Zweiter Teil, Antike Wald- und Feldkulte aus Nordeuropäischer Überlieferung erläutert*, Berlin, Gebrüder Borntraeger, 1877). Mannhardt, in fact, represented a break-through in folkloristics similar to that of Robertson Smith in the history of religions. However, there is nothing indicating that Robertson Smith was directly influenced by Mannhardt, although it is probable that he might have known of Mannhardt's work through Frazer, cf. Ackerman, pp. 81–82.
53 The use of the term 'accessory' for describing the relation of myths to rituals was originally forwarded in A. Hvidtfeldt, *Teotl and *Ixiptlatli. Some Central Conceptions in Ancient Mexican Religion with a General Introduction on Cult and Myth*, Copenhagen, Munksgaard 1958, p. 17. See below for further comments on this work.
54 Hvidtfeldt, pp. 14–15.
55 Ibid., p. 16.
56 Ibid., pp. 17–19.
57 Ibid., p. 16.
58 Harrison, p. 329.
59 During this period Marcel Mauss (1872–1950)—himself later a prominent sociologist and anthropologist—was the only student following Durkheim's course on the origin of religion. In a retrospective essay Mauss recalled that 'we [Durkheim and Mauss] were contended with the work of Frazer and, above all, Robertson-Smith'. (M. Mauss, 'An intellectual self-portrait', in P. Besnard (ed.), *The sociological domain. The Durkheimians and the founding of French sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1983, p. 145.)
60 S. Lukes, *Émile Durkheim. His Life and Work. A Historical and Critical Study*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books 1973, pp. 237–240.
61 Ibid., p. 244, p. 450.

62 Durkheim, p. 206.
63 B. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic. A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, vols I–II, London, George Allen & Unwin 1935, vol. II, p. 235.
64 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1956 (reprinted 1970), p. 313.
65 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *A History of Anthropological Thought* (A. Singer, ed.), London, Faber and Faber 1981, p. 81, my italics.

MARGIT WARBURG is assistant lecturer in sociology of religion at the Institute of History of Religion, University of Copenhagen. Her main area of research is religious minorities, in particular Bahá'ís and Jews. She has published *Iranske dokumenter. Forfølgelsen af bahá'ierne i Iran*, Copenhagen, Rhodos 1985 [Iranian Documents. The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran] and has co-edited *Der var engang . . . amol iz geven . . . Jødisk kultur og historie i det gamle Østeuropa*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal 1986 [Once upon a time . . . amol iz geven . . . Jewish Culture and History in Old Eastern Europe]. She is currently doing fieldwork and archival studies at the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel.

Department of Sociology of Religion, Institute of History of Religion, University of Copenhagen, St Kannikestraede 11, DK-1169 Copenhagen K, Denmark.