

Chapter Six

The 'Faculty of Faith': Evangelical missionaries, social anthropologists, and the claim for human unity in the 19th century¹

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In his influential *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (1804:354), the deputy judge-advocate David Collins (1756-1810) dismissed claims by an 'eminent divine, that no country has yet been discovered where some trace of religion was not to be found' and pronounced the Aborigines of Port Jackson free of any trace of a religious state or knowledge: 'It is certain, that they do not worship either sun, moon, or star; ... neither have they respect for any particular beast, bird, or fish'. The question of Aboriginal belief engaged the minds of those eighteenth-century Britons who were eager for details on the new colony. Captain Watkin Tench (c. 1759-1833), whose lively *Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* was published in 1793, was frequently asked on his return: "'Have these people any religion: any knowledge of, or believe [sic] in a deity?—any conception of the immortality of the soul?'" (1793:183-4). In complete opposition to Collins, Tench (1793:186) responded with a close description of Aboriginal belief in supernatural forces and closed by 'expressing my firm belief, that the Indians of New South Wales acknowledge the existence of a superintending deity'.

Heathens and the capacity for religious thought

In the century that followed, descriptions of religious activity from around the world became evidence in debates on whether the capacity for religious belief was a universal human attribute and whether the supposed presence or absence of religion could help define the nature or extent of human difference. This chapter traces these discussions in Britain and the Australian colonies, focussing on the personal, theological, and political tensions that shaped the observations and the theoretical texts from which they were formulated. The evidence and the findings tacked between two related questions. First, whether indigenous people had a priori religious beliefs — a question that went to the heart of the relationship between faith and humanness in the debate over single or multiple

human origins. Second, whether such people had the intellectual or spiritual capacity to respond to Christian doctrine. Those who believed that all people did have such a capacity tended to presume that all non-Christians held some form of spiritual belief, however erroneous. Yet the questions were distinct and the evidence relating to them was used to service different arguments.

Prior to the nineteenth century, across different eras and religious denominations, Europeans concerned with European exploration and expansion had debated the relationship between indigenous rights and the capacity for religious thought. The sixteenth-century Spanish jurist and theologian Francisco de Vitoria (1486?-1546) argued for the political and legal status of Native Americans (1991:233-92), contending that, while they were barbarians and unbelievers, they undoubtedly carried the capacity for Christian knowledge and that it was the duty of the Spanish representative to present the means for their salvation. In his theological musings on the question (1992:75), the Dominican friar and contemporary of Francisco, Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), argued for the natural faculty by which men are led to 'the worship of God, or of what they believe to be God'. Therefore regardless of the barbarity or state of the nation, human society could not exist 'without the worship of the true or false deity'. The Moravian Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) insisted that the nature of heathen deities was less significant than their existence. Any spiritual response to the natural world was proof of God's immanence. He sent his missionaries to the field in 1734 with the comforting text from Paul's letter to Roman Christians on the heathen experience of God: 'for what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse ...' (Romans 1:19-20).² Therefore, Zinzendorf insisted, the heathen 'know already that there is a God' and are ignorant 'only of the Son' (Hutton 1923:21).

The 'eminent divine' referred to by Collins was Hugh Blair (1718-1800), Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Edinburgh and a significant figure in what came to be known as the Scottish Enlightenment, whose *Sermons* were among the best-selling works of the English language in the eighteenth century.³ Blair (1777-1801, I:4-5) preached on natural religion, arguing that if there is any sense 'which man is formed by nature to receive, it is a sense of religion.... Cast your eyes over the whole earth.... You may discover tribes of men without policy, or laws, or cities, or any of the arts of life: But no where will you find them without some form of religion'. The theological argument that humanity possessed a natural capacity for faith was central to debates amongst Calvinist Evangelicals in the eighteenth century over whether civilization should precede Christianity. The historian Brian Stanley (2001:180) described it as the belief in

an 'innate moral sense or conscience' by which the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with the human will and the essential knowledge provided by the missionary, could bring about salvation.⁴

In the nineteenth century, the question of the presence or absence of natural religion was contested on scientific as well as legal and theological grounds. The battle line was drawn initially and most sharply between Christians who supported missionary work, a task predicated on the universal capacity for religious thought, and certain 'natural historians' or 'philosophers'. Some men of science sought to prove either that multiple human species had developed from separate origins that could be tracked through evidence of physical, intellectual, or religious distinctions or that long isolation had created physical differences which reflected the intellectual or moral divergence of different races. The former position, which was professed by relatively few philosophers or naturalists, was completely beyond the pale for all Evangelical Christians. The latter — that differences in intellectual or spiritual abilities had developed as a result of the early separation of human populations — was more common but was equally threatening to the missionary project. As the discipline of anthropology was being established in British universities in the late nineteenth century, the argument over the significance of religion in the role of human unity changed. Now, the absence or presence of a religious sensibility became a sign of the evolution of the psyche and implicit evidence for the maturation of human beings from apes. Here, theorists such as Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) lined up against Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and John Lubbock (1834-1913) on the evidence, or otherwise, for a 'primitive' religious sensibility, particularly amongst Aboriginal people in the Australian colonies.

The development of the British missionary movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries coincided with Evangelical alarm about increasingly strident philosophical assertions against original human unity emanating in particular from France (Stanley 2001:11). In a sermon preached in 1824, Reverend Richard Watson (1781-1833), a Methodist intellectual and secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society that had been founded eight years earlier, advocated the religious instruction of the slaves in the West Indies. Taken from the text 'Honour all men' (1 Peter 2:17), Watson's sermon was a direct attack on literature which claimed that black people were either immutably distinct or a different species altogether from Europeans. Watson dismissed as self-serving the observations of slave owners on the essential inferiority of their charges and castigated those who used Biblical texts to claim Negro inferiority. Noah's curse on Ham, he argued, was not on Africans but on the Canaanites who were made the slaves of the Israelites. Therefore the curse, if it could be said to exist in any general sense, was on a tiny portion of Asia rather than any of the African tribes. Watson also turned his scorn on '*minute*

philosophers', one of whom, he said, had claimed in the previous twelve months that the degeneracy of Africans denied 'all cultivation of mind, and all correction of morals'. He dismissed as 'affected philosophy' attempts to 'measure mind by the rule and compasses; and estimate capacity for knowledge and salvation by a scale of inches and the acuteness of angles!' While acknowledging the supposedly low state of African civilization, Watson insisted that it was the result of political oppression by the 'civilized' nations, which had systematically enslaved millions of Africans over centuries, and not of the base nature of the African people.⁵

Against those who 'by the dreams of a theory' challenged the concept of a single human species and in so doing banished millions 'out of the *family* of God', Watson put forward one criterion for essential and original human unity. In a test that simultaneously denied human difference, claimed Christian jurisdiction, and was a call for missionaries to the cause, he insisted that unity between humankind could be proved where congregations showed themselves to be 'capable of loving God'. The findings from this test were already to hand: missionaries to the slave plantations of the Caribbean and in the missions to Africa described their converts as 'flashing with the light of intellect, and glowing with the hues of Christian graces'.⁶ Watson's sermon was a clever subversion of the philosophical discussion on the 'natural' state of man and the claims that black people were intellectually and morally inferior. He urged mission supporters and philosophers alike to look to the outcomes of Christian preaching for the proof of human similarity. Addressed to a large and respectable congregation, Watson's sermon was a triumph: it was immediately published and went rapidly to a fourth edition. The readership included Members of Parliament and non-Methodists who found it an eloquent statement on human difference and the role of Christian mission during the turbulent years when church-goers backed the Anti-Slavery League and became increasingly involved in questions of Christianity and civilization amongst the native populations in the colonies of Tasmania, New South Wales, and New Zealand.⁷

There were at least two possible candidates for Watson's unnamed philosopher who disputed African equality. In the previous twelve months, the French naturalist Julien-Joseph Virey (1775-1846) had published the second edition of his *Histoire naturelle du genre humain*, 'Natural History of the Human Genus' (1824), in which he claimed that black Africans were biologically, mentally, and morally inferior to whites as a result of separate origins (Augstein 1996:xxvi). Less heterodox but still unacceptable to Evangelical missionaries was a popular edition of *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* (1822) by the anatomist William Lawrence (1783-1867). Lawrence (1822:473) upheld the important doctrine of the unity of the human species but insisted that differences of 'physical organisation and of moral and intellectual qualities'

between the 'several races of our species' were the result of 'native or congenital varieties' which were then transmitted to offspring in 'hereditary succession'. This analysis was an insidious challenge to Evangelical Christians for it implied that human difference, while classified as 'varieties' rather than as original, was nonetheless immutable or biological. Lawrence (1822:423) even claimed to provide proof that members of the 'black variety' were aware of their inferiority with the poignant tale of an African found weeping and moaning that 'black men are nothing'. His volume amounted to an attack on the primary theology of *imago dei*, that man is made in God's image with universal abilities. It was also a threat to important new political initiatives such as the establishment of Liberia in 1821 as a haven for former slaves, an experiment that was followed keenly by naturalists and Evangelical missionaries alike.⁸

Data for Lawrence's lectures came from around the world and included a large footnote transcribed from Collins's account of the Aborigines of Port Jackson. Based on Collins's relatively benign descriptions, Lawrence (1822:413, 433) wrote a damning analysis: these were a people of 'remorseless cruelty, ... insensible to distinctions of right and wrong, destitute of religion, without any idea of a Supreme Being, and with the feeblest notion ... of a future state'. He acknowledged tensions with the Evangelical movement with a nod to their motivations of 'philanthropy and benevolence' but insisted that his analysis was based on unsentimental reason and that political decisions relating to slaves and colonized people 'must be limited by the natural capabilities of the subjects'.

Indigenous Gentiles: human unity and missions

Missionaries to the Australian colonies faced frequent charges that their efforts were beyond the mental capabilities of their flocks. Such threats could even come from the clergy. After early failures to persuade Aboriginal children to remain in his household, Samuel Marsden (1764-1838), the colonial chaplain to New South Wales who was instrumental in bringing the gospel to Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand, doubted that Aborigines were capable of civilized or Christian responses and was increasingly reluctant to extend limited funds to missionary efforts in New South Wales.⁹ Responding to a request from his archdeacon for information on the state of New South Wales Aborigines in 1826, Marsden (1974:349) admitted their essential humanity but questioned their capacity for religious thought: 'the want of reflection upon their past, present and future, which is so strikingly apparent in the whole of the conduct of the Aborigines, opposes in my mind the strongest barrier to the work of a Missionary'.

This passage must be considered in the context of the debate then running between Marsden and his enthusiastic subordinate, Lancelot Threlkeld (1788-1859) of the London Missionary Society, who was dependent on Marsden

for maintaining funds to his mission to the Awabakal people of Lake Macquarie. Threlkeld's description of his intermittent congregation was written in the same year as Marsden's comments, amid considerable settler hostility towards Aborigines and with the fear that the mission was at risk of losing its funding. While acknowledging that the religious ideas of his flock were false, Threlkeld (1974, I:52) found them no more 'contemptible than the pretended finding of the golden-plates and the magic spectacles, through which alone the book of Mormon could be read by the impostor Joe Smith'. Threlkeld held that the beliefs of his congregation indicated their religious sensibility and he made close analogies between Jewish, Christian, and Awabakal rituals that can be read both as a plea for universal ability and an implicit claim for continued support of the mission. The point also had legal implications: on the basis that Aborigines did not believe in a 'Supreme Being' and therefore could not swear an oath, Aboriginal testimony was inadmissible in the law courts of New South Wales until 1876 (Wright 2001:140). Against numerous detractors, Threlkeld insisted:

It matters not how simple soever the act may be which is done as a testimony of acknowledgment of the power of a superior being, whether that Being be the Almighty true and only God, or the mere imaginary Demon of the Gentiles; whether the child be sacrificed as a burnt offering to Devils, or a tooth knocked out as a security against the anger of *Puttikán* an imaginary supernatural Being of whom the aborigines in these parts of the colony stand in dread; or whether the evidence of belonging to the ancient people of God under the Old Testament dispensation be the circumcision of the fore-skin, or in the dispensation of the New Covenant, the holy people use water as the witness of the external purification of the flesh, symbolical of the internal baptism by the holy spirit of God, or ever we can enter into the kingdom of heaven (1974, I:61).

Ultimately, Threlkeld's arguments for the mission failed and it was closed in 1828. He believed that the principal reason the funding was stopped was because he disputed the common belief that 'Aborigines are incapable of civilization and instruction' and he acknowledged that on this point he was in opposition to Marsden. Against many settlers, significant sectors of the colonial administration, and even his own superior, Threlkeld (1828:65) argued that 'Aborigines are not "Baboons", that they have no "innate deficiency of intellect"', and that they might be brought eventually to 'sit at the feet of Jesus, clothed in their right mind'. He was aware that evidence of the religious sensibility of Aborigines strengthened their claims for political, legal, and economic rights. For this reason, he was strategic in his choice of terms. Along with many other missionaries, Threlkeld used 'Gentile' rather than 'heathen' to describe his congregations. 'Gentile' sidestepped the Christian/heathen, civilized/savage oppositions and

drew Aboriginal people closer to Biblical history where belief in the Jewish God was an ongoing matter of theological debate and discussion rather than a scientific, moral, or intellectual sign of human difference and ability.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the most important British theorist to draw on reported observations of newly-encountered people was James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848), described by his counterpart in the second half of the century, Edward Burnett Tylor, as the 'founder of modern anthropology' (Stocking 1973:x). Prichard's use of physical evidence might have left him vulnerable to Watson's invective against those who 'measure mind by the rule and compasses' but he remained true to his devout Quaker upbringing and later membership of the Evangelical wing of the established church and maintained his belief in the orthodox view that humankind was born of a single origin.¹⁰ Prichard's major ethnological publication, *Researches into the Physical History of Man(kind)*, was revised three times between 1813 and 1847. The first volume of the third edition includes a new chapter that marks a significant shift from the physical focus of his earlier work. Titled 'the psychological comparison of human races', the chapter is based almost entirely on Moravian missionary accounts of Bushmen, Eskimos, and sub-Saharan Africans.¹¹ Prichard readily accepted Moravian conversion accounts as psychological evidence that all people share the 'same mental endowments, similar natural prejudices and impressions, the same consciousness, sentiments, sympathies, propensities, in short, a common psychical nature or a common mind'. The evidence for religious and by extension moral and intellectual parity could be found in the common 'tendencies to superstitious belief, as well as the same moral impressions as the rest of the human family'. Prichard believed he had defined a 'new subject of enquiry'.¹² His modern editor George Stocking, Jr. (1973:lxv) argued that Prichard had extended the human unity discussion from the physical to the psychological realm, a position developed in the second part of the nineteenth century as the 'psychic unity of man'. Evangelical Christians of the period who were familiar with the text, however, almost certainly viewed Prichard's use of missionary texts as an important scientific confirmation of the general unity of the human species, viewed in Christian terms and confirmed by missionary observations.

Debates on the unity or otherwise of the human species were influenced by political events and often coalesced around societies and institutions.¹³ The year after Prichard published the first volume of his third edition, the Aborigines Protection Society was established in Britain to agitate for indigenous rights. While the fight for legislation against slavery in the colonies had been won in 1833, Evangelical Christians were increasingly concerned by the more insidious dangers of colonization. In 1838, the Anglican Church Missionary Society petitioned the British Parliament against the granting of a major charter to colonize New Zealand, arguing that European colonization had 'disastrous

consequences to the Aborigines of uncivilised countries in their rights, their persons, their property and moral condition' (Stenhouse 1994:399). However, there was no single missionary stance on colonialism in the Pacific throughout the nineteenth century. Denominational differences, political circumstances, both internal and international, as well as changing ideas of the relationship between subject and state meant that missionaries occupied the spectrum of political responses to colonization and often advocated European intervention, particularly in the face of settler encroachment on indigenous land.¹⁴

During the early nineteenth century, many missionaries proceeded to the field on the assumption that humanity could be defined by the capacity to form a relationship with the Christian God. Once in the field, and particularly when they began to translate the Scriptures into local languages, missionaries became profoundly entangled in indigenous beliefs as they searched for concepts that could bridge the differences between Christian doctrine and cosmology on the one hand and local ideas on the other.¹⁵ Evidence for human unity and God's immanence could be found in a variety of sources. The Protestant call to translate the Bible into all tongues was based on the belief that every language had been created by God and therefore contained the means to describe the revelation of Jesus (Sanneh 1989:201). In 1850, John Geddie (1815-1872), a Presbyterian missionary on the island of Aneityum in what is now Vanuatu, wrote of translating the New Testament (1975:63): 'The study, however, is one of intense interest and delight; and those are privileged indeed, whom God permits to prepare the key which will unlock the hidden treasure of divine truth, which makes the soul rich for all eternity'. While the presence of heathen spirits or gods was generally taken by missionaries as evidence of degeneration, it could also serve the more significant purpose of proving the essentially spiritual nature of the unconverted. Geddie's colleague John Inglis (1808-1891) insisted that the Aneityumese idea of spirit possession indicated a spiritual — as opposed to secular — nature that corresponded closely to the Christian idea of the spirit and revelation. As with Threlkeld, Inglis made ready analogies between local and Jewish beliefs. He believed that Aneityumese messages from the spirits were:

not the inspiration of genius, as accepted by a sceptical or a secular philosophy, but a personal inspiration ... distinct from the man's soul, speaking through the lips of the poet; the Scriptural idea of inspiration as expressed by David in his last words, when he said, 'The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue' (1882:xxxvi, original emphasis).

Such analogies served the dual purpose of bringing the heathen into the Christian world and indicating to sceptics that they shared their history and humanity with the frequently despised native. For many missionaries, conversion was not

merely proof of the indwelling God but was a significant marker of their own faith for it proved the universal appeal of Christ and, by extension, the unity of humankind.

'The faculty of faith': evidence and theories

As Geddie and Inglis were establishing the Aneityum mission, the German scholar and linguist Friedrich Max Müller, who remained a committed Lutheran despite the theological and scientific debates that raged around him, was settling into Oxford as professor of modern languages and later comparative philology (Chaudhuri 1974:69). Over the next thirty years, Müller was to prove an important advocate for human congruity, particularly on the issues of faith and intellect. Profoundly influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), Müller developed an essentially evolutionist theory that 'myth' was the product of an 'indwelling law' through which religious belief was expressed. Thus, Christianity was inherent in all faiths as it found expression in different phases along the path to the godhead (Trompf 1969:202). While believed by many to be profoundly Darwinian, Müller refused to admit the mechanism of natural selection in relation to the development of language and held that the capacity for speech constituted the demarcation point between human beings and animals. In 1873, he delivered a series of lectures on this point against Darwin's theory (Müller 1873). Darwin, acknowledging Müller's intellect and standing, pronounced him a 'dangerous man' and wrote that being criticized by him made him feel 'like the man in the story who boasted he had been soundly horsewhipped by a Duke' (Chaudhuri 1974:258). Müller was a friend and correspondent of a number of missionaries in the field, including the Bishop to the Melanesian Mission John Coleridge Patteson (1827-1871), his colleague Robert Codrington (1830-1922), and the Methodist Lorimer Fison (1832-1907).¹⁶

For some clergy and missionaries, the debate about religious sensibility was formulated on the idea of degeneration: the belief that, after the deluge and the dispersal of the tribes, some had wandered so far across the world and been separated from God for so long that they had lost the ability to think in religious terms. For others, less concerned with Biblical literalism, 'degeneration' was merely the loss of the conscious knowledge of God: indigenous beliefs, while misguided, were proof of an inherent spiritual capacity which indicated their place in the family of God. Still others professed, along with Müller, a form of evolutionism in which races gradually passed through stages of religious belief led by the indwelling Spirit towards the pinnacle of Christian knowledge.

The text from the Australian colonies that was to prove most influential in British debates in the 1860s and 1870s on the religious sensibility of Aborigines was *Queensland, Australia* (1861) by Reverend John Dunmore Lang (1799-1878). The book was primarily intended as an invitation to immigrants but also includes a long essay on Queensland Aborigines based on Lang's attempt in 1837 to

establish a mission at Nundah, Queensland, which was abandoned in 1843. As a result of this failure, Lang was dubious about the intellectual or religious ability of Aborigines (Bridges 1993:12). While Lang's numerous publications ensured his reputation in Britain, in the Australian colonies his relationships were so rancorous that he defended a number of libel charges over the course of his career, including one from Threlkeld whom he sought to have dismissed.¹⁷ In *Queensland, Australia*, Lang focused his well-honed scorn on a successful publication by Paul Edmund de Strzelecki (1797-1873), *Physical Description of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land* (1845). In this account, Strzelecki (1845:339) claimed that indigenous Australian 'recognise a God, though they never name him in their vernacular language, but call him, in English, "Great Master," and consider themselves his slaves.... They believe in an immortality, or after-existence, of everlasting enjoyment, and place its locality in the stars, or other constellations'.¹⁸ Lang's response to Strzelecki showed the minister's theological opposition to the notion of a universal religious sensibility and probably harked back to his opposition to Threlkeld. 'I have always been very sceptical in regard to the ideas alleged by certain travellers to be entertained by barbarous tribes on the subject of God', wrote Lang (1861:375-6). He acknowledged that it was against the 'preconceived ideas, or the philosophical system, of certain writers, to admit that there is any portion of the human race living entirely without a religion' and yet missionaries reported such evidence not only amongst the 'Papuan aborigines of Australia' but also in the fledgling congregations of Greenland and Southern Africa.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, religious belief, or the lack thereof, became fertile ground for the discussion of the relationship between human beings and animals. Lang's testimony became evidence for both sides of an unexpected alliance between, on the one hand, clergy or religious people who believed in degeneration and were horrified by the suggestion that heathen beliefs shared anything with the Christian promise of salvation; and, on the other hand, scientists who were keen to minimize the distinction between some human beings and animals in order to strengthen evolutionary arguments about the ultimate origin of mankind within the animal kingdom or to prove that human races were the outcome of multiple origins. In a short address to the Anthropological Society of London in 1864 on the 'Universality of Belief in God, and in a Future State', the Archdeacon of Westminster, the Very Reverend Frederic W. Farrar (1831-1903), who was later chaplain to Queen Victoria, quoted Lang, amongst others from around the world, to claim (1864a:ccxvii): 'there are not only isolated tribes, but whole nations who are so degraded as to live with no knowledge of their Creator'. For Farrar (1864a:ccxviii), the revelation of Christ and the Judeo-Christian God had no parallel with the spirits of 'savages' whose religious beliefs could be compared to the involuntary reactions of animals: 'a vague fear of the Unknown is found even among animals, and is widely different

from a belief in God'. The assembled members then debated the paper and revealed a range of possible positions on the issue. Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) described the absence of belief amongst the 'wild tribes of Molucca and of New Guinea' with whom he was familiar. A Reverend Kerr commented that in his parish work in Liverpool he had found many who had 'but little notion of a God'. Another insisted that he had never met an African Negro who did not believe in the existence of a good or bad spirit. The president of the Anthropological Society, James Hunt (1833-1869), a professed polygenist, believed that Farrar's evidence against the general assumption of universal belief was of particular importance to anthropology. For his part, Farrar held that he was merely confirming the Biblical claim that 'there were people who knew not God' (1864a:ccxix-ccxxi). However, his second paper, 'On Hybridity' (1864b), which was then read to the members, was based on a scientific argument about interracial infertility that revealed he had a close knowledge of polygenist theories on the failings of the human 'hybrid' and his analysis implied separate human origins.

In the early 1870s, several anthropological texts addressed the question of a universal religious sensibility in relation to the distinction between human beings and animals. In their respective publications *The Descent of Man* (1871) and *The Origin of Civilisation* (1870), Darwin and Lubbock implied that the absence of religious belief amongst some human groups could be likened to a psychic missing link that was evidence for the maturation of human beings from apes.¹⁹ Opposing them, from a different intellectual tradition, were Tylor, who published *Primitive Culture* in 1871, and Müller, whose *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) argued for a universal and innate religious sensibility in all human groups.²⁰

In *The Origin of Civilisation*, Lubbock (1870:212) stated that the 'evidence of numerous trustworthy observers' opposed the belief that 'religion is general and universal'. Lang was held to be a particularly trustworthy observer as his findings were believed to be in opposition to his Christian beliefs. Yet here Lubbock was either ignorant of Lang's degenerationism or misrepresented him. Degenerationism as professed by Lang meant the loss of the knowledge of God to the point where a religious sensibility was completely absent. Lang (1861:377) held that 'Papuan' ignorance of the 'knowledge of God' was to be expected for 'almost every trace of divine knowledge ... [had] disappeared at a comparatively early period in the history of the postdiluvian world, among all the other Gentile nations'. This position was distinct from evolutionist theories such as Lubbock's which claimed that the gradual development of man from ape could be mapped on to existing populations using evidence such as religious sensibility. Without acknowledging Lang's degenerationism, Lubbock (1870:212) simply used his work as evidence for his own implicit claim of the essential similarity between the 'lowest races'

and animals: 'we must admit that the feeling of a dog or a horse towards its master is of the same character; and the baying of a dog to the moon is as much an act of worship as some ceremonies which have been so described by travellers'.²¹

Lubbock's friend and mentor Darwin published *The Descent of Man* the following year. In a chapter comparing the 'Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals', Darwin (1871, I:53-62) responded to those who insisted that the gulf between human beings and animals could not be bridged by his theory. 'Instincts' shared with animals, such as maternal affection, curiosity, imitation, attention, were the primary foci of the chapter but he also included discussion on language with an oblique attack on Müller. The chapter finishes with a sub-section on 'Belief in God — Religion' (1871, I:65-9). In an attack on Tylor's explicit claim for a universal religious sensibility and his implicit argument that this was a primary division between human beings and animals (Tylor 1866:71-81; 1870:370), Darwin insisted:

There is no evidence that man was aboriginally endowed with the ennobling belief in the existence of an Omnipotent God. On the contrary there is ample evidence, derived not from hasty travellers, but from men who have long resided with savages, that numerous races have existed, and still exist, who have no idea of one or more gods, and who have no words in their languages to express such an idea (1871, I:65).

Darwin (1871, I:65-7) did allow that amongst 'the less civilised races' there was a universal belief in 'spiritual agencies' but held that this did not mark the divide between human beings and animals because a similar belief could be found in his dog, a 'very sensible animal' who growled at the movement of a parasol in the wind, attributing it to some 'strange living agent'.

In his conclusions, Darwin (1871, II:394-5) acknowledged the importance of the debate over an innate religious sensibility to his theory of the development of human beings from animals: 'The belief in God has often been advanced as not only the greatest, but the most complete of all the distinctions between man and the lower animals'. He even provided a salve to religious sensitivities concerned about the point of human development where man developed an immortal soul and he stopped short of the explicit suggestion that 'primitive man' was not part of the family of God. Ultimately, however, Darwin insisted that it is 'impossible to maintain that this belief [in God] is innate or instinctive in man'.

E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, also published in 1871, is primarily a work on religion. The anthropologist Adam Kuper (1988:77) argued that during this early period of anthropology there was a shift from questions of political development to the relationship between belief and rationality. Thirteen of Tylor's twenty

chapters in the two-volume work are concerned with rites, rituals, mythology, and animism. The chapters on animism begin with the question posed in his two earlier articles on religion: 'Are there, or have there been human tribes so low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatever?'¹²² While Tylor insisted that the question had been asked over centuries, in this instance it was clearly formulated against Lubbock and Darwin. The observations of J.D. Lang were immediately in Tylor's firing line. Recognizing the degenerationism in Lang's analysis that Aborigines were without belief in a god, Tylor applied some of Lang's other findings of evil or benign spiritual agents to his own definition of what constituted religious thought, based on his theory of animism. By this criterion, Tylor (1871, I:379) found that Lang's observations were proof that 'the natives of Australia were at their discovery, and have since remained, a race with minds saturated with the most vivid belief in souls, demons, and deities'.

Tylor supported this argument with page after page of careful depositions against similar claims for the absence of religious thought amongst indigenous people. He held that the primary error committed by those who failed to acknowledge a religious sensibility in their observations was the definition of religion as 'the organised and established theology of the higher races' (1871, I:380). The words that follow dramatize the divide between earlier anthropologists such as Prichard, who had been sympathetic to missionaries and uncritically accepted the quality of their accounts, and their more sceptical successors who held that missionary observations were invariably tainted by an overt Christian agenda. Tylor believed that missionaries who acknowledged the pre-Christian beliefs of their congregations were rare and enlightened souls. He claimed, however, that for the most part the "religious world" despised heathen beliefs and that missionaries had neither the time nor the capacity to understand them. Kuper convincingly argued that the implication to be drawn from Tylor's theories on religious evolution was that nineteenth-century man was developing beyond belief and theology to the superior knowledge of science. The most progressive vantage point from which to view 'primitive religion', therefore, was that of the scientific observer. According to Tylor, missionary observations were intrinsically tainted, owing to the beliefs of the observer, and belonged to an earlier system of data collection (Kuper 1988:80).

The strongest definition of the role of faith in the unity of humankind came from Müller's series of lectures published in 1873 as *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. In a thesis that sustained his attack against Darwin's attempt to minimize the human/animal divide, Müller described the religious sensibility as one of the two faculties that defined man as utterly distinct from animal:

As there is a faculty of speech, independent of all the historical forms of language, so there is a faculty of faith in man, independent of all historical religions. If we say that it is religion which distinguishes man from the

animal, we do not mean the Christian or Jewish religion; we do not mean any special religion; but we mean a mental faculty, that faculty which, independent of, nay in spite of sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and under varying disguises. Without that faculty, no religion, not even the lowest worship of idols and fetishes, would be possible; and if we will but listen attentively, we can hear in all religions a groaning of the spirit, a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter the unutterable, a longing after the Infinite, a love of God (1873:17-18).

As with Prichard, Müller believed that the correlation between faith and human unity was proved by a capacity for religious thought rather than an adherence to a specific religion. His final sentence in the above passage shows the usefulness of developmental theory as a means both to describe and prescribe differences between human groups. As Stocking (1968:73) has shown in relation to Tylor's use of the singular for 'culture' in his famous definition of the term, Müller's reference to the 'lowest worship of idols and fetishes', followed by the use of upper case and singular for 'God', suggests similarly that religious evolutionism described difference as stages along a single defined path toward a Christian end.

George Brown, Frazer, and the origins of totemism

As these debates were being conducted in London in the 1870s, missionaries were establishing new fields throughout the western Pacific and were forming links with metropolitan theorists, particularly Tylor and Müller.²³ In 1875, George Brown (1835-1917), who had begun his mission career for Methodism in Samoa in 1860, was founding a new mission on the Duke of York Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago of what is now Papua New Guinea. Shortly afterwards, he began to publish articles on anthropological matters and made contact with Tylor just prior to the theorist's appointment to Oxford University as the first lecturer in Anthropology. Brown and Tylor communicated intermittently over the next twenty years (Gardner 2006a:111-27).

Brown was one of a number of missionary anthropologists familiar with metropolitan literature. He read Müller while in Samoa and was enthusiastic about Lubbock's *Origin of Civilisation* which he read in his final years in the Bismarck Archipelago, despite the scorn of many of his colleagues who were generally scathing about Lubbock's ethnological pastiches.²⁴ Many of Brown's published articles were concerned with the debates on an ethnological division of the Pacific which he addressed most comprehensively in his book *Melanesians and Polynesians* (1910). Brown's response to Tylor's edited publication *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1874) reflected the symbiotic but ambivalent relationship between missionaries and contemporary anthropology. Indeed, the text itself

points to the great split between the Ethnological and Anthropological Societies of London that had been resolved three years prior to its publication.²⁵ Part One, entitled 'Constitution of Man', was compiled by John Beddoe (1826-1911), a former president of the racist Anthropological Society who was then engaged in the comprehensive measuring of the British population (Stocking 1987:66). The section was exclusively concerned with physical anthropology and included questions on the 'form and size' of 'living subjects' and instructions on how to measure the human body (Tylor 1874:1-6). While these questions might not have been abhorrent to the ornithologist in Brown, they were clearly incompatible with his Evangelical ideals of human unity. He largely ignored the section on physical anthropology except for a few terse responses that show little more than his desire to subvert the spirit of the inquiry. He was clearly more comfortable with Part Two of *Notes and Queries* and the questions on 'Culture' that were compiled by E.B. Tylor, long affiliated with the humanitarian Ethnological Society. Brown answered most of the questions from these sections, often with long and detailed explanations that readily agreed with the mode of investigation. He similarly refused to use physical evidence as a means of classifying difference across the putative Melanesia-Polynesia division (1887:312), arguing that the difficulties were such that the evidence was inherently unsound.

In 1889, Brown received a letter and a copy of 'Questions on the Customs and Superstitions of Savages' from James Frazer (1854-1941), then a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge.²⁶ By this link, Brown was drawn into the great late-nineteenth century question regarding religious sensibility, the relationship between magic and science. Central to the debate was the anthropological term 'totemism' which was defined as the origin of erroneous magical thinking and the mechanism by which the 'lowest races' sought spiritual answers for material phenomena. From the base line of totemism, human evolution led to increasingly sophisticated religious thought and then finally to science. The implication was that, by this route, humanity was progressively freed from religious falsehood.²⁷ Melanesia was proving to be a rich field in the study of the relationship between totemism and marriage classes and Frazer actively courted Brown as one who was 'intimately acquainted with the local people'.²⁸ The two men corresponded over the next twenty-five years and in *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910), in a chapter on 'Totemism in Northern Melanesia', Frazer (1910, II:119,122-3) quoted extensively from Brown's 1877 paper on the Bismarck Archipelago as well as from *Melanesians and Polynesians*. To Frazer (1910, II:151), the Bismarck Archipelago offered 'pure' forms of totemism that rested easily within prescribed definitions. It also fitted the expected correlation between race and development — Melanesians had totems while Polynesian forms had purportedly 'developed' into religion. In this scheme, the Palau Islands, which were reported as having both totems and religion, provided the link between the two regions.

Frazer closed *Totemism and Exogamy* with his final theory that totemism originated from the failure to identify the role of the male in human conception.²⁹ He based his theory on the fieldwork of the biologist Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) and the Alice Springs postmaster Frank Gillen (1856-1912) who spent some months amongst the Aranda (now Arrernte) people of central Australia in the last years of the nineteenth century. In reply to their question, asked ad nauseum, the people told the researchers time and time again 'the child was not the direct result of intercourse' (Wolfe 1994:180). Frazer (1910, IV:61) believed that the apparent failure to attribute conception to intercourse was the source of totemism and, according to evolutionist theory, the origin of all religion:

Ignorant of the true causes of childbirth, they imagine that a child only enters into a woman at the moment when she first feels it stirring in her womb, and accordingly they have to explain to themselves why it should enter her body at that particular moment ... The theory of the Central Australians is that a spirit child has made its way into her from the nearest of those trees, rocks, water-pools, or other natural features (1910, IV:57).

While Brown was a keen informant for anthropological theorists, he clearly believed that Frazer's theory came too close to defining the Arrernte as a proto-religious group. His problems were twofold. First, there were political dangers for the Arrernte people implicit in such a definition. It could be argued that this period marked the high tide of European claims for Aboriginal inferiority and their anticipated extinction. Second, Brown was alert to the threat to Christianity in Frazer's suggestion that religion was little more than a long progression from an original erroneous explanatory system to the eventual triumph of science. In his response to Frazer's 'conceptional' theory in a paper to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (1911), Brown made pointed arguments against Frazer's findings. He held that Frazer did not properly account for a number of beliefs that would have to have been present before the 'conceptional' belief could occur: for example, there must have been a prior belief in 'totem spirits' as well as a prior belief in both a 'spirit child' who entered the mother's womb and the ability of the mother to receive the 'totem'. Brown concluded, against Frazer: 'there must, in fact, have been totems before the totemic spirit could enter the womb of the woman'. The aging missionary then made a bold statement on the unity of humankind through the faculty of faith:

For the origin of totemism, we must, I think, go back to a period far earlier than that which is indicated by the conceptional idea ... when man first became conscious of the existence of a power, or powers, outside of himself.... How that consciousness was created or evolved is a matter with which I am not at present concerned. I myself, while accepting all the facts, and believing some of the theories, of evolution and quite

prepared to find some day that, so far as the body of man is concerned, every proof has been given of our ascent from the most primitive forms of life, also believe, with Mr A.R. Wallace and many others, that in everything which differentiates man from all other creatures he is a special creation of God. I believe this ... because he alone has the religious instinct, and that is found amongst men everywhere, even in the lowest states of culture (1911:403-4).

Frazer's analysis troubled Brown's uneasy adherence to cultural evolutionism. He described the data as 'so abnormal and contrary to experience' that some other explanation had to be available and he concluded that Gillen and Spencer were probably missing vital information. Brown's alternative theory was that 'knowing herself to be pregnant (as all women do)' the Arrernte woman simply takes the 'necessary steps to fix the totem of her child' (1911:407-8). Therefore the two beliefs, biological conception and the entering of the 'totemic spirit' into the womb, could be held simultaneously. Brown's outburst on the religious instinct showed his unease that evolutionist speculations on the gradual development of all aspects of human ability undermined the theology of human unity. Brown maintained the place of an innate and universal capacity for belief, human reasoning, and intelligence and questioned the implication that Arrernte (and by extension other Aboriginal groups) marked the very origin and therefore the lowest level of intellectual and religious states.

Conclusion

Throughout the nineteenth century, evidence and debates about the role of faith in the unity and/or original diversity of humankind shaped metropolitan theories as well as observations from the periphery. Most observers were aware of the debates on the issue and structured their reports according to their positions which could encompass a range of theological, political, and scientific theories. The question of 'The Faculty of Faith' was loaded with implications for the conceptualization of relationships between human groups and eventually between human beings and animals. Along with other Evangelical missionaries such as Threlkeld and Inglis, Brown constantly and anxiously patrolled contemporary debates about human difference and was alert to the political, religious, and moral implications of philosophical and scientific theories. Brown's anthropological interests and the terms on which he agreed to debate human difference were directed by his Christian insistence on human similitude. While he joined many of his fellow missionaries in accepting the logic of social evolutionist theory, he simultaneously sought to temper the implications of its findings. Theorists such as Tylor and Müller consistently argued for the psychic unity of man and the universal intellectual and religious capabilities of all human beings. Müller, secure in his own faith, was never concerned with suggestions that human beings were progressing beyond religion. Tylor, however, mapped

out a particularly modernist position where faith became the preserve of the primitive and the less advanced and could only be successfully investigated by the post-Christian scientific anthropologist. Lubbock and Darwin sought to downplay the sophistication of native faith in order to minimize the division between people and animals and advance the theory that human ability, whether religious, moral, or intellectual, was neither innate nor universal but developed through time and could be mapped on to contemporary human populations.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the issue of the 'faculty of faith' appeared to have lost its relevance to the discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists generally seemed to have accepted the Tylorian position that all belief in spirits was evidence of religion. However, the evolutionist theory on the gradual development of religious belief from animism to monotheism to science was a popular idea that maintained the opposition between 'civilized' and 'primitive'. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to move into the twentieth century, it would seem that secular modernism created new implications for the question of primitive belief. In the popular imagination, the question suggested two possible answers: either indigenous peoples had maintained 'traditional' beliefs which were clearly outdated by rational thought; or they had been 'coerced' into Christianity, a level of religious belief which many believed to be beyond their cultural and moral capacity.

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Notes

¹ I acknowledge the fruitful discussions with Robert Kenny in which much of this paper was conceptualized.

² Biblical citations are from the *The New Revised Standard Bible, Oxford Annotated* (Metzger and Murphy 1991).

³ Dwyer 1987:19; Sher 1985:13.

⁴ The ontological debate on the relationship between people and God meant that the response to preaching was deeply entwined with ideas on the natural or God-given state of all people. These debates were marked by denominational distinctions: for example, in the mid-eighteenth century, the Presbyterian theologian Robert Wallace was convinced that the success achieved amongst Native Americans by the Baptist missionary David Brainerd and the conversions brought about in England and Scotland by the Evangelical Anglican George Whitefield resulted from the unfortunate excitation of natural passions that were present in all religions rather than from an appeal to natural reason or superior powers that could be found only in Christianity (Maxwell 2001:125).

⁵ Watson 1824:4, 7, 8-9, original emphasis. Watson was an active supporter of the Anti-slavery Society and in 1830 he persuaded the Methodist Conference to depart from Wesley's argument against political involvement and urge Methodists to vote against slavery (Goldhawk 1978:119).

⁶ Watson 1824:4, 7, original emphasis.

⁷ Maxwell 2001:127; Tyrrell 1993:49.

⁸ See Chapter One (Douglas), this volume, for detailed consideration of the scientific positions on man taken by Virey and Lawrence.

⁹ Stanley 2001:187; Gunson 1974:10-11; Yarwood 1977:241.

¹⁰ Samson 2001:109; Stocking 1987:48-53.

¹¹ Prichard 1836-47, I:165-216. The Moravians were the first of the modern Protestant missionary societies. In an outburst of missionary zeal between 1734-37, this church sent missionaries to slaves in the West Indies, to Greenland, South Africa, the Dutch East Indies, and to Amerindians under the instructions and patronage of Count von Zinzendorf. Andrew Walls (2001:30-2) claims that the British Evangelical and missionary movement owed much to Continental Pietism and the Moravian example. John Wesley was converted at a Moravian meeting in London.

¹² Prichard 1836-47, I:170, 212; Prichard, quoted in Stocking 1973:lxxxiv.

¹³ E.g., in London, the tensions and differences between the Ethnological and Anthropological Societies can be read in their responses to the Jamaica uprising in 1866 that was brutally suppressed by Governor Edward John Eyre (1815-1901). The Ethnological Society joined humanitarians in condemning Eyre's response while the Anthropological Society, believing that Negroes were a different species, held that the suppression of the uprising was proper given the immutable distinctions between black and white people (Stocking 1987:251).

¹⁴ Gardner 2006a:89; Gunson 1965:310; Stanley 1990:68-78.

¹⁵ Gardner 2006b; Owens 1970:289-303; Sanneh 1989:193-7.

¹⁶ Müller 1976, I:302-3; Stocking 1996:18, 34, 44.

¹⁷ Bridges 1993:34; Gunson 1974:24-5.

¹⁸ It is evidence of the significance of the debate that the Aborigines who gave this account to Strzelecki were almost certainly making some syncretic analysis of the Christian God and Aboriginal belief. Strzelecki was dealing with Aboriginal groups who had been in direct or indirect contact with Europeans for up to fifty years. Therefore, they would almost certainly have heard something about the European religion prior to their meeting with the explorer. Yet the point was politically significant and Strzelecki made it within the context of the debate about Aboriginal humanity.

¹⁹ As a young boy, Lubbock was befriended by his near neighbour Darwin who oversaw his first scientific publication. The geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1875) sponsored Lubbock's election to the Geological Society and he was acquainted through his membership of royal societies with most of the well known scientific figures of the period, including Huxley, Wallace, Spencer, Tylor, and Galton (Rivière 1978:xix).

²⁰ I concur with Stocking that it is important not to overdraw the connections between Darwinian evolution and theories of cultural development. While theorists such as Tylor and Müller were clearly in discussion with Darwinian notions of natural selection, the primary influences on their ideas of cultural change were pre-Darwinian, in particular the work of Prichard (Stocking 1968:91-109).

²¹ The point was particularly pertinent to Archbishop Richard Whately's case against evolutionism which Lubbock addressed in an appendix to *The Origin of Civilisation* (1870:337-62). The appendix includes a counter-attack on the Duke of Argyll's degenerationist arguments against Lubbock's earlier work *Pre-historic Times* (1865) (Stocking 1987:160).

²² Tylor 1866:71; 1870:370; 1871, I:378.

²³ Gunson 1978:21; Müller 1976, I:302; Stocking 1996:34.

²⁴ Brown to Fison, 6 January 1872; Brown to Pratt, 4 April 1879, in Brown 1876-80. Many of Brown's contemporaries had also read Lubbock. His colleagues Lorimer Fison and Robert Codrington were both disdainful of the text (Stocking 1996:17, 40). However, Fison's partner in his anthropological work, the Victorian police magistrate and anthropologist A.W. Howitt, was inspired by Lubbock's earlier book *Pre-historic Times* (Mulvaney 1981:57).

²⁵ Stocking 1987:248-62; see Chapter Four (Turnbull), this volume.

²⁶ Frazer to Brown, 9 February 1889, in Brown 1877-1914.

²⁷ Kuper 1988:76-91; Sanneh 1996:43.

²⁸ Frazer to Brown, 9 February 1889, in Brown 1877-1914.

²⁹ This discussion resurfaced in the late twentieth century. Wolfe (1994:165-205) proposed a problematic reading of the correlation between the conclusions formulated on Arrernte theories of conception and subsequent colonial policies to contain miscegenation whereas Mallet (1995:41-58) discussed the issue reflectively.