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## Cultural Darwinism: Race and Radio in the Early Twentieth Century

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# Cultural Darwinism

## Race and Radio in the Early Twentieth Century

Emily Beth Santor  
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## Introduction

For those who are unfamiliar with the term, ‘mansplaining’ refers to a moment when a man takes it upon himself to educate others with a "delightful mixture of privilege and ignorance that leads to condescending, inaccurate explanations, delivered with the rock-solid conviction of rightness and that slimy certainty that of course he is right, because he is the man in [the] conversation."<sup>1</sup> Since its introduction to the English language in the early 21st century, mansplaining has generally been used in reference to women’s rights and feminism’s struggle with cultural misogyny. However, the term serves as an excellent metaphor to describe the situation that occurred in the focus of this essay – a radio symposium about science and religion. The men who spoke in the symposium were regarded as experts in their fields mostly due to their privilege, class, race, and gender – none of which they earned and none of which qualified them to talk about the subject. Rather than men explaining women – as is the case with mansplaining – this symposium shows white Christians explaining non-white non-Christians. This ‘white-splaining’ or ‘Christian-splaining’ resulted in a prejudiced, ignorant worldview which was spread throughout the Western world. This symposium is one of many similar bricks that built the foundation of racist and oversimplified conceptions of world religion in the generalized Western consciousness today.

Western consciousness can be influenced by many varying factors, including mass media. Radio technology significantly impacts public consciousness because it is a ubiquitous but generally unnoticed source of information. People do not usually stop to think about the amount of social data they intake by just going about their lives. Radio was a developing technology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its social implications had not yet been fully realized.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Healey. “A woman’s born to weep and fret,” *Live Journal*, 8 May 2009

Before the invention of the internet and television, radio was the only form of mass media. Information broadcast through the radio had a much more crucial impact than previous communication technologies such as newspapers. This impact is one of the characteristics that enable it to be considered a religious technology. The information shared through the radio affected the worldviews of the tens of thousands of people living in Britain at the time. Radio is both a product of the culture and simultaneously a magnifying glass for certain aspects of the culture. The ability of radio broadcast information to be spread so widely so instantaneously meant that the magnifying glass quality was very powerful indeed. Hence, the opinions expressed in the science and religion symposium did reflect the cultural norms of the time, but they also enhanced particular sentiments and ensured their continued presence in Western culture. Namely, they propagated the social theory of cultural Darwinism.<sup>2</sup>

When most people think of Darwinism and religion, they think of the modern creation versus evolution debate. They think of religion and Darwinism as opposing, mutually exclusive concepts working at cross purposes. However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scientists, philosophers, and men working in a religious profession came together to use Darwinism as a tool to explain (fallaciously) their perspectives. These cultural Darwinists misappropriated Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in an effort to comprehend their place in a rapidly changing world. Many factors affected how their sense of cultural identity changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Colonialism and the Enlightenment desire to emulate Grecian values created a pressure to separate the Christian 'West' from the racially profiled Semitic traditions of Judaism and Islam. Following the example of philologists (language scholars), comparative religion 'scientists' (otherwise known

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<sup>2</sup> Social theories and colloquial theories should not be confused with scientific theories. Scientific theories (like evolution and gravity) are ways to describe the natural world that scientists are essentially convinced of their truth. The only reason they are called the Theory of Gravity and not the Fact of Gravity is because upstanding scientists are aware of the fact that nothing can ever be positively proven – there is always room for bias, error, and new information provided through new technologies or new hypotheses.

as cultural Darwinists) forged an existential outlook based off their invented racist categorizations of world religion.

The symposium, *Science & Religion*, that was broadcast over the BBC in 1930 exemplifies the problematic assumptions made by religion scholars and ‘scientists’ of comparative religion at the time. This symposium was a series of twelve talks by prominent scientists and clergymen. These talks serve as a snapshot of the movement to advance the science of comparative religions. The men speaking in this symposium reveal hierarchical paradigms that value certain religions over others seemingly on the basis of race. They mistakenly appropriate Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and apply it to human cultures to rationalize this biased point of view. As a remarkable social tool, broadcast radio enabled this racist message to be disseminated among the masses in such a way that its reverberations remain deeply embedded in Western culture today.

From September to December of 1930, this series of talks was broadcast throughout Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Its stated purpose was to give a

personal interpretation of the relation of science to religion by speakers eminent such as churchmen, as scientists, and as philosophers; and to determine, in the light of their varied and extensive knowledge, to what degree the conclusions of modern science affect religious dogma and the fundamental tenets of Christian belief.<sup>4</sup>

The foreword by Michael Pupin provides some clues about the nature of the content of this symposium. First, the information presented in this symposium is clearly only relevant to

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Julian Huxley; Professor Sir J. Arthur Thomson; Professor J.S. Haldane; the Right Rev. E.W. Barnes, Bishop of Birmingham; Professor B. Malinowski; the Very Rev. H.R.L. Sheppard, Dean of Canterbury; the Rev. Canon B.H. Streeter; Professor Sir Arthur S. Eddington; Professor S. Alexander; the Very Rev. W.R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul’s; Dr. L.P. Jacks. *Science & Religion: A Symposium*. (New York, C.: Scribner’s Sons, 1931), “Note”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., “Note”

Western culture because each speaker is a well-to-do, white Englishman who has conceivably limited his study of science and religion to Western modes of thought. In fact, although the symposium claims to be on the subject of science and religion, it is readily apparent that it is only concerned with Western, post-Enlightenment science and Western religious systems (Protestantism, in particular). The professed purpose of this series of talks is to prove that science and religion share a common goal, that

one cannot fail to recognize that Science and Religion are the offsprings of the same fundamental belief that there is an eternal truth which is intelligible, and that the longing is deeply planted in the soul of man to search for morsels of this truth in every nook and corner of the physical as well as the spiritual universe. Without this longing the life of man would lose most of its meaning; it would certainly lose the knowledge of its Creator.<sup>5,6</sup>

In other words, the men whose thoughts are immortalized in this symposium represent the desire to find ultimate truth. This search is ultimately their downfall as they presume that their truth must inherently be truer and thus more important than the truths of others. This basic supposition drives the fallacious reasoning prominent in the symposium. We could oversimplify here and say that truth is the root of all evil in this series of talks.

The conjecture of singular, superior truth can be deconstructed to help us understand how cultural Darwinism functioned. First, the symposium speakers surmised that the truths belonging to science are different truths than the ones belonging to religion. Second, they assumed that religions could be categorized as true or false. In order to remain focused in spite of the wealth of fascinating material available in the symposium, only ideas about religion and science related

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. xi

<sup>6</sup> The use of the generic masculine is a common foible among pre-21st century scholars, but it is always worth noting that the use of the generic masculine to describe the entire human species is incredibly problematic and reminiscent of the historical and continued oppression of those who identify as female or non-binary in Western society.

to cultural Darwinism will be presented. This arrangement of their talks is not intended to give the idea that all twelve men agreed with each other about the nature of the relationship between science and religion or even which methodologies should be used to examine them. However, this style allows a glimpse into their cultural Darwinian tendencies without getting side-tracked by issues of equal importance, if not relevance, to the focus of this paper.

### **Setting the Scene: Britain, 1930s**

The 1930s were a time of great social, political, and economic change. This decade is usually characterized by massive unemployment due to the Great Depression – the economic crisis that occurred after the infamous Wall Street crash in 1929 which sent shock waves through a society drunk on the rewards of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Despite the crisis, emerging technologies and enterprises such as automobiles, aircraft, and electronics kept parts of Great Britain afloat until the industry boom created by World War II in 1939.<sup>8</sup> Counterintuitively, perhaps, while the unemployment rate fluctuated from dreadful (22.8% in 1933) to mildly alarming (13.9% in 1936), the poverty rate actually declined during this time (10% in 1930 to 4% in 1936).<sup>9</sup> A new style called Art Deco appeared (term coined and henceforth retroactively applied at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, 1952), filling buildings with furniture and architecture replete with “geometric shapes instead of the flowing lines” associated with Art Nouveau, the previous style *du jour*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Lambert. “Everyday Life in Britain in the 1930s,” *Local Histories*, accessed April 4, 2017

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The monarch at the time was King George V (reign 1910-1936).<sup>11</sup> In response to the Great Depression, he convinced the disparate factions of British government to unite into a coalition force that could deal with the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup> 1931 saw the Statute of Westminster introduce noteworthy change to the British empire: after the conclusion of World War I, Ireland, Canada, Australia, India (to some extent), New Zealand, and South Africa demanded the “right to self-governance.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike his predecessors, George V sought to “embody those qualities which the nation saw as their greatest strengths: diligence, dignity and duty. The monarchy transformed from an institution of constitutional legality to the bulwark of traditional values and customs (particularly those concerning the family).”<sup>14</sup> His reign altered the personality of the British monarchy to mirror “the values and virtues of the upper middle class rather than the aristocracy.”<sup>15</sup> Although the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of political and economic upheaval, his dedication and commitment, his “good relationships with the Labour Party and unions,” and his humility allowed him to moderate tension and move the British Commonwealth beyond its contemporary struggles.<sup>16</sup>

In 1924 and from 1929 to 1935, Ramsay MacDonald was Prime Minister of Great Britain.<sup>17</sup> He was a left-wing politician who became unpopular after criticizing the British government for amorally engaging in the war with Germany.<sup>18</sup> He is credited with being the first prime minister from the new Labour Party, and his leadership oversaw the recognition of the

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<sup>11</sup> “George V (1910-1936),” *Britannica*, accessed April 6, 2017

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Biography.com Editors. “George V Biography,” *TheBiography.com*, (A&E Television Networks), accessed 6 April 2017

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Ramsay MacDonald: Prime Minister of the United Kingdom,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, updated 29 July 2016

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Soviet regime and the Geneva Protocol approved by the League of Nations.<sup>19</sup> In 1931, MacDonald resigned as prime minister (as a member of the Labour Party) – due to his professed lack of understanding of the economic crisis – only to take on the role of prime minister again for the new coalition government; unsurprisingly, this move made him less than popular with his old Labour Party colleagues.<sup>20</sup>

To summarize: in 1930, Britain was dealing with the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, the global political change effected by World War I and demands for national autonomy, and the rise of new technologies inspired by the Industrial Revolution. These factors affected British identity and forced the British to re-evaluate their position in the world.

## **Broadcast Radio Culture**

One of the emerging technologies of the 1930s was broadcast radio.<sup>21</sup> Although the first radio technology was created by Nikolai Tesla in 1893, the official patent for the modern radio in use today belongs to Guglielmo Marconi, to whom it was awarded by the British Government in 1896.<sup>22</sup> In 1904, the Wireless Telegraphy Act declared that “all wireless transmitters and receivers must be licensed by the Post Office”; this Telegraphy Act would play a crucial role in creating the BBC down the line.<sup>23</sup> Initially, the radio was used to transmit messages in Morse code to naval ships that were out at sea, which meant that radio use surged during World War I.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> For a full history and analysis of broadcast radio, see: Hugh Chignell. *Public issue radio: talks, news and current affairs in the twentieth century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011),

<sup>22</sup> Logan Wyman. “The History of Communication Technology: Radio,” *Pennsylvania State University*, April 2008

<sup>23</sup> Paddy Scannell, David Cardiff. *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One 1922-1939*, (Oxford, Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p. 5

<sup>24</sup> Wyman

Two “key features” of the British broadcasting system that worked in tandem to allow radio to generate massive social influence were the license fee and the monopoly.<sup>25</sup> Logistically, the license fee introduced by the 1904 Wireless Telegraphy Act granted the Post Office the “power to define the terms and conditions upon which licenses were granted.”<sup>26</sup> These licenses permitted broadcasters to legally use the radio waves to broadcast their programming to the public; each broadcasting entity had to pay this fee in order to produce programming. The Post Office was, at the time, the “state’s major revenue-producing department,” and it sought to further increase its revenue by exploiting the license fee.<sup>27</sup> The monopoly was established with the creation of the BBC: the British Broadcasting Company (later changed to the British Broadcasting Corporation) came into existence in 1922.<sup>28</sup> After only a few months of broadcasting, a special committee was convened to address the confusion and concerns of the people “who feared the radio would seriously affect their health” and the popular press “which believed that a radio news service would harm its circulation.”<sup>29</sup> This 1923 Sykes Committee decided that broadcasting should be regarded as a distinctly “public utility” and should therefore be treated with caution.<sup>30</sup> They stated,

The ‘wavebands available in any country must be regarded as a valuable form of public property; and the right to use them for any purpose should be given after full and careful consideration...the control of such a potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state.’ The operation of so important a national service ought not to be allowed to become an unrestricted commercial monopoly.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Scannell, p. 5

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wyman

<sup>29</sup> Scannell, p. 6

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Notice, the Sykes Committee was concerned about the possibility of a commercial monopoly, but they had no such reservations about creating a monopoly handled by the government.

Despite their assertion that authority should “remain with the state,” they did not advocate for “direct government control.”<sup>32</sup> Rather, they insisted that

indirect control should be operated through the license which by law must be obtained from the Post office for the establishment of any broadcasting station. The terms of the license, laid down by the Post Office, would specify the general responsibilities of the broadcasters and hold them answerable for the conduct of the service to the state department.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the state did not directly dictate the content of BBC programming, but it loomed over production nevertheless like a strict parent. The first Director General of the British Broadcasting Corporation, John Reith, made it his business from 1923 to 1938 to ensure the “development of a programme service guided by considerations of national service and the public interest.”<sup>34</sup> If the public and popular press had not been interested in the social implications of the broadcasting monopoly, the Sykes Committee may have never been convened. Without the conclusions reached by this committee, British Broadcasting may not have become the public service behemoth that it remains to this day.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, radio technology was an almost magical, unfamiliar communication tool. Following its use as a military tool, integrating the radio into the daily life of British citizens was not an easy task; it took some time before it was “accepted culturally.”<sup>35</sup>

Radio represented a “different” and “mysterious” chasm of possibility that entranced the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 6-7

<sup>35</sup> Paul Rixon. “Radio and popular journalism in Britain: Early radio critics and radio criticism,” *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, Vol. 13, No. 1 & 2, 2015, Doi: 10.1386/rjao.13.1-2.23\_1

public.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, even as the radio transmitted the news, it was itself newsworthy in much the same way that hoverboards and virtual reality technology amaze and attract the attention of people today.<sup>37</sup> Interest in this technology centered on “the quality of reception, the mystery of radio, its social impact and the...the wonder of hearing something live through a small box many miles from where it was happening.”<sup>38</sup> The nearly instantaneous connection unaffected by time and space must have been as unfathomable in 1930 as quantum weirdness is incomprehensible in 2017.<sup>39</sup>

Unmoved by this fascination, Director General Reith remained open to the practical possibilities made available by this new technology. He was adamant that broadcast radio

must not be used for entertainment purposes alone...[It] had a responsibility to bring into the greatest possible number of homes in the fullest degree all that was best in every department of human knowledge...Broadcasting should give a lead to public taste rather than pander to it...[This service] had an educative role and the broadcasters had developed contacts with the great educational movements and institutions of the day in order to develop the use of the medium of radio to foster the spread of knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

In Reith’s words, it is evident that this public service should have an aspect of the cultural, the moral, and the educational. Additionally, “as [he] was well aware, [radio] had a social and political function too.”<sup>41</sup> This national broadcasting service presented the opportunity to unify disparate classes of the population as never before.<sup>42</sup> Reith cites the speech given by George V for the opening of the British Empire Exhibition; radio’s ability to relay national ceremonies and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Yes, ‘quantum weirdness’ is a technical term. See John C. Caiazza. *The Disunity of American Culture: Science, Religion, Technology, and the Secular State*. (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers, 2013) Chapter 8: Atoms in the Cultural Void: Steven Weinberg’s Material Dreams

<sup>40</sup> Scannell, p. 7

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

functions live “had the effect, as he put it, of ‘making the nation as one man.’”<sup>43</sup> Even more than unification, radio had the “immense potential for helping in the creation of an informed and enlightened democracy” by enabling citizens to “take an interest in many things from which they had previously been excluded” due to their class or race.<sup>44</sup> Radio had the flexibility to present on any significant social issue “both the facts of the matter and the arguments for and against.”<sup>45</sup> Reith envisioned “a new and mighty weight of public opinion” strengthened by a citizenry with an informed mind of its own rather than one who was forced by circumstance “to accept ‘the dictated and partial versions of others.’”<sup>46</sup> In his imagination, the “concept of public service...had, as a core element, an ideal of broadcasting’s role in the formation of a reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a mass democratic society.”<sup>47</sup> It was exactly this sort of motivating idealism that led to the production of programmes such as the symposium on *Science & Religion* in 1930.

## Broadcast Radio as a Religious Technology

Broadcast radio functions as a religious technology in its role as a mass communication device. According to theorist Jeremy Stolow, technologies are “pragmatic and productive forms of mediation between human subjects and their environments.”<sup>48</sup> This definition by no means fully encompasses the many disparate conceptual theories of technology, but it will help elucidate how broadcast radio worked as a religious technology. Similarly, defining religion is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 7-8

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Stolow. “Technology: religion versus technology, religion and technology, religion as technology,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, edited by David Morgan, (New York, London: Routledge, 2008), p. 188

not an objectively feasible task. Theories on religion range from understanding the world according to a dichotomy or a harmony of the sacred and the profane to viewing religion, to a system that oppresses its adherents, or to a system that orders existence in a rationally comprehensible fashion. For this essay, religion will be considered that which organizes human existence in a way that interacts with cultural notions of the sacred. A religious technology therefore is one which mediates human experience with those aspects of their environment related to their understanding of the sacred. Stolow elaborates,

Rather than searching for an inferior experience or feeling of divine presence, of the numinous, or the sacred that can somehow be shorn of all outward trappings, we are more amply rewarded by examining the myriad ways in which religious experiences are materialized, rendered tangible and palpable, communicated publicly, recorded, and reproduced – in short, *mediated* – in and through its given range of technological manifestations and techniques.<sup>49</sup>

Technology, when considered in this way, becomes the medium through which religion is practiced, shared, and discussed. Without technology, it could be argued that religion would not be able to operate.<sup>50</sup> Technology allows humanity to access the sacred through written word, instruments, methods of breathing, and other techniques germane to each unique religious practice.<sup>51</sup> Because of this mediation, technology “shape[s] human experience by actively participating in – and thereby transforming – networks of action” in human communities.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, technologies can be religious in nature, and religion is inherently technological.

Broadcast radio is one of those religious technologies because it functioned within the society of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain to mediate the human experience of the sacred. Broadcast radio connected thousands of people to a central source of information that influenced how they

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 195

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 194-195

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 195

conceptualized their lives, as noted by Reith above. One “unique” feature of broadcasting that differentiated it from other communication technologies like newsprint is that it comes to people in their homes and often seems to have a kind of “disembodied authority.”<sup>53</sup> The technology of broadcasting granted an “enormous importance to the spoken word.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, in the 1930 symposium, the widespread dissemination of specifically religious ideologies highlight radio’s ability to mediate between impressions of the sacred and the humans tuning-in to the radio programme.

It is important that this symposium was spread through the medium of broadcast radio because its special status as a dominant influence in the daily lives of radio listeners. This power meant that the ideologies expressed in the symposium both reflected the culture and in turn changed it. One person commented, “The growth of broadcasting...has been like a revolution.”<sup>55</sup> Another explained, “At home everybody...is played upon by a constant stream of sounds bringing entertainment and news, events as they happen, music, politics and teaching.”<sup>56</sup> Broadcast radio was a universal medium of which everyone could partake – even the young, the old, the blind, or the infirm.<sup>57</sup> The universal and inclusive nature of broadcast radio allowed the messages of the symposium to be absorbed by the entire British population without discrimination.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the BBC’s professional commitment to manage “controversy” in potentially politically charged issues (like the intersection of science and religion, for example) allowed the symposium speakers “the greatest possible freedom of speech” while simultaneously halting the “tiresome charges of political bias”.<sup>59</sup> This freedom which allowed the speakers to

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<sup>53</sup> Mary Crozier. *Broadcasting: sound and television* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 2

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>58</sup> Pun intended.

<sup>59</sup> Chignell, p. 19

express themselves truthfully without outwardly appearing to be too prejudiced was a factor in creating trust between listeners and the BBC. This trust in the message of the media magnified the ubiquitous power of broadcast radio.

The downside of this great influence was that the views being communicated by radio were generally more radical than average. The men (and very few women) who spoke “were undoubtedly extremely famous celebrities of their day, [but] also held dangerously radical views.”<sup>60</sup> Some Marxist critical theorists argue that “journalism’s function is essentially one of social reproduction, in the service not of society as a whole, but of its dominant groups and classes.”<sup>61</sup> These radical views were simply new ways of envisaging a worldview framed by patriarchal, Western hegemonic power dynamics. This view of media – “as a ‘consciousness industry’ propagating a ‘one-dimensional’, ‘affirmative’ culture” is one often shared “not only among Marxists, but feminists and others concerned with the sociology of culture.”<sup>62</sup> Despite its apparent popularity and rationality, this theory should not be considered the end-all-be-all explanation for why British society embraced and propagated the message shared by the symposium speakers. As always in the academic world, more scholarship exists and also is yet to be discovered in the areas of radio culture, the psychology of radio, and its impact on contemporary events and ideologies.

## Original Darwinism

The idea that phylogenies could be used to organize the religions of the world was one that helped spark the science of comparative religions. Before the appropriation of Darwinism and its application to world religions can be examined, some basic knowledge is required

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>61</sup> Brian McNair. *News and journalism in the UK* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 24

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 26

regarding biological phylogenies – the original phylogenies – and Darwin’s theory of evolution.<sup>63</sup> In the 1820s, Darwin embarked on a five-year expedition to gain extensive data and knowledge in the field of zoology, the study of animals.<sup>64</sup> From this experience came the “germinal ideas” for his theory.<sup>65</sup> In 1859, his treatise titled *The Origin of Species* was published.<sup>66</sup> In brief, his theory of natural selection is that “favorable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavorable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species.”<sup>67</sup> What this means is that all things being equal, traits that better enable animals to survive would be passed onto future generations of animals because the parent animals survived long enough to reproduce. Conversely, animals that had traits that did not lend themselves to survival would most likely not survive long enough to pass on such unfavorable traits.

Science novices may ask, “What are these ‘traits’, and where do they come from?” During the process of gene replication that takes place in the cells of living organisms, mistakes sometimes occur. These mistakes are called mutations. While the term ‘mutation’ may carry a negative connotation in colloquial English language, it has no such weight within the biological community. A mutation has neutral value; it has the capacity to be either a benefit or a burden to the organism. When a mutation is a benefit, it increases the likelihood that its host organism will survive, which in turn increases the likelihood that the mutation will be passed along to further generations of that particular organism. When a mutation is a burden, it may either kill the

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<sup>63</sup> Alfred Russel Wallace was another British naturalist who concurrently developed a theory of evolution. In the biological community, it is more accurate to discuss Darwin *and Wallace’s* theory of evolution, rather than merely referencing Darwin. In fact, if not for Wallace’s catalytic actions, Darwin may never have actually published his research. However, for the sake of concision and clarity, only Darwin will be discussed here. Wallace, as he so often must, will have to excuse the author for her neglect. See the “Introductory Note” from *The Origin of Species*, edited by Charles W. Eliot for more details on Wallace’s pivotal role.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Darwin. *The Origin of Species*, edited by Charles W. Eliot, (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), p. 5

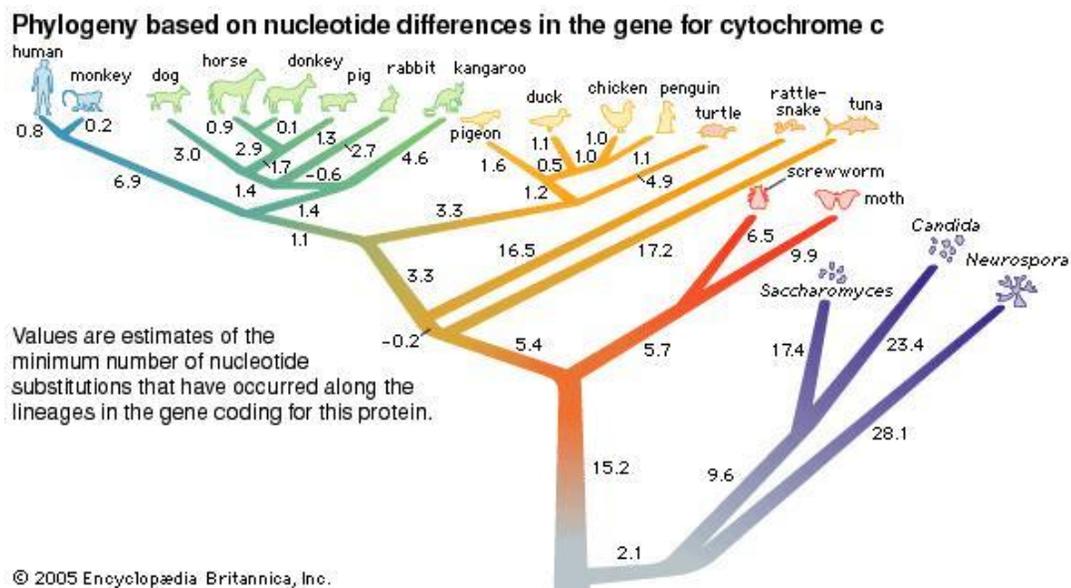
<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 7

organism outright (as is often the cause of miscarried or stillborn babies) or merely decrease the likelihood that the organism will survive long enough to reproduce, which in turn decreases the chances that the burdensome mutation will appear in future generations. Over the millennia, populations of organisms become distinguishable from one another through their possession (genotype) and expression (phenotype) of certain mutated genes. Darwin termed this process “natural selection.”<sup>68</sup>

Observation of physical traits (phenotype), experimentation to determine genetic information (genotype), and more recently, the technology of gene sequencing, have allowed scientists interested in evolution to create a sort of road-map tracing the origin of these mutated genes. These road-maps are called phylogenies and can be used to illustrate how various species are related to one another. See *Figure A* for an example of such a phylogeny.



*Figure A.* This phylogeny shows the relationship between mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, insects, bacteria, and fungi using the genetic mutation of nucleotide substitutions for a particular protein, in this case the protein cytochrome c.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

<sup>69</sup> “Phylogeny based on nucleotide differences,” accessed 1 May 2017

The more mutated genes two species have in common, the more likely it is that they are more closely related. Despite centuries of naturalists' observations of animal life, each phylogeny is only an educated guess. No self-respecting scientist would claim that their phylogeny represents the absolute truth of evolution. Firstly, the only way to verify the accuracy of a phylogeny would be to become a god, travel back in time, and watch the progression of life on Earth from the very beginning until the present. Secondly, good science requires a consciousness that subjective predisposition can never be truly erased from even the most prudent of experiments. With the same data, two dissimilar scientists will create two dissimilar phylogenies that reflect their individual and cultural biases.

## **Cultural Darwinism**

The so-called science of comparative religions emerged in response to a crisis of modernity, specifically the demand for a solid European identity, created by globalization in the wake of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment attitudes about knowledge and truth shaped how scholars approached the practice of comparative religion. The science of comparative religion looks at “phenomena of human thought and conduct...tracing the history of their developments and corruptions, and classifying them according to their observed relations.”<sup>70</sup> The science of comparative religion attempts to borrow the principle of observation from the scientific method in order to examine human cultures and categorize them according to their apparent differences. This practice began in 19th century Europe.<sup>71</sup> For a long time, the people of Europe had “a well-

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<sup>70</sup> Merwin-Marie Snell. “The Nature and Scope of the Science of Comparative Religion,” *The Biblical World*, Vol. 8, No. 3, (The University of Chicago Press, September 1896), accessed 1 May 2017, p. 204

<sup>71</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa. *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xiv

established convention for categorizing the peoples of the world into four parts, rather unequal in size and uneven in specificity, namely, Christians, Jews, Mohammedans [*sic*] (as Muslims were commonly called then), and the rest.”<sup>72</sup> This type of categorization seemed to work fine in the rather small world of the Middle Ages, but following the Enlightenment, it was no longer adequate. With the advent of the inductive reasoning method championed by the Enlightenment, “those branches of science which deal with the merely phenomenal aspect of things [had] undergone an enormous development.”<sup>73</sup> As Enlightenment rationality became the order of the day, certain principles at the foundation of Western religious tradition were questioned. For instance, people wondered

whether monotheism – the doctrine of one universal god – should continue to be assumed as the basis of universality...it was no longer the absolute authority of some irascible creator-judge deity ruling in the desert, but rather something more mellifluously philosophical and abstract, that genuinely embodied the principle of unity and universality.<sup>74</sup>

Questioning these assumptions signaled a cultural shift from a society dominated by the church to one ruled by inquisitive thought, ingenuity, and a turning away from blithely accepting religious doctrine at face value.

Colonialism played an influential role in the creation of comparative religious studies. A perceived need to separate Christianity from other religious traditions came as part of a general movement to more sharply define European identity in the face of the modernity crisis of globalization. Modernity refers both to the time period following the Enlightenment as well as to a “consciousness of cultural change” that affected how people conceptualized their place in the

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<sup>72</sup> Masuzawa, p. xi

<sup>73</sup> Snell, p. 203

<sup>74</sup> Masuzawa, p. xiii

world.<sup>75</sup> Despite Europe's apparently dominant position in the colonial world, "in this novel state of global connectedness, the West suddenly found itself to be not so much in masterly control as perilously vulnerable, as it found its own state of well-being inexorably dependent on unseen and unknown realities as remote as a village halfway across the planet."<sup>76</sup> Religion theorist and champion of comparative religion Mircea Eliade captures this existential crisis of modernity in his discussion of what he calls "the grave crisis brought on by the discovery of the historicity of man [*sic*]."<sup>77</sup> Historicism is Eliade's theory that "history reveals itself to be a new dimension of the presence of God in the world."<sup>78</sup> He explains that the entirety of human history therefore should be regarded as a theophany – a manifestation of God; "everything that happened in history *had to happen as it did*, because the universal spirit so willed it."<sup>79</sup> He proposes,

This new dimension, the historicity, is susceptible of many interpretations. But it must be admitted that from a certain point of view the understanding of man as first and foremost a historical being implies a profound humiliation for the Western consciousness. Western man considered himself successively God's creature and the possessor of a unique Revelation, the master of the world, the author of the only universally valid culture, the creator of the only real and useful science, and so on. *Now he discovered himself on the same level with every other man, that is to say, conditioned by the unconscious as well as by history* [emphasis added] - no longer the unique creator of a high culture, no longer the master of the world, and culturally menaced by extinction.<sup>80</sup>

With this uncomfortable realization, the need for strength and solidarity was imminent. Changing the intellectual categorization of the Christian religion was "part of a much broader, fundamental

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<sup>75</sup> Lindsay Jones. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. Vol. 9, s.v. "Modernity". (Detroit, New York, San Francisco, San Diego, New Haven, Conn., Waterville, Maine, London, Munich: MacMillan Reference USA, 2005), p. 6108-6109.

<sup>76</sup> Masuzawa, p. 41

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326

<sup>78</sup> Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 111-112

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>80</sup> Masuzawa, p. 326

transformation of European identity.”<sup>81</sup> This transformation resulted in a rebranding of Europe as ‘the West.’ We can examine “scholarly works of some prominent nineteenth-century savants and intellectuals [to see how they] exemplified the way Europeans reimagined themselves as ‘the West’ and reconceptualized their relation to the rest.”<sup>82</sup> Colonialism was a noteworthy part of this globalization, and European identity rebranding must be understood within its context. When we consult the scholastic literature of the 19th and early 20th century, a disconcerted mood indicates “that the whole world [was] undergoing a profound transformation unlike any other in history. At the same time, it also implied that an adequate appreciation and comprehension of this transformation [was] possible only from a widely panoramic, indeed imperially global, perspective.”<sup>83</sup> In due course, it became apparent that the to fit within this imperially global perspective, any “discourse on religion(s)” must “be viewed as an essential component, that is, as a vital operating system within the colonial discourse.”<sup>84</sup> The scholars responsible for the study of comparative religions wanted to

acquire, and acquire quickly, a sweeping knowledge of the multiplicity of religions in the world because a new techno-geopolitics was unfolding dramatically before one’s eyes, and it was vitally necessary to come to terms with this strangely brave new world, indeed with a brand new sense of the world itself. The new vision of the world was a necessary consequence of violent globalization in the form of colonialism.<sup>85</sup>

Hence, the pluralistic theory of world religions fulfilled a need to understand what which was previously incomprehensible. Pluralism functioned to “distinguish the West from the rest.”<sup>86</sup>

For Western society, “[w]hat gave particular urgency to this new perception of the increasingly

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

global reality was that the news coming from afar was on balance not very good; certainly by the 1930s there was a growing sense of an impending, or perhaps already unfolding catastrophe.”<sup>87</sup> To combat this fear borne of finding themselves in a much larger world than had been imagined in previous centuries, Europeans needed a way to conceptualize their position in the world in relation to everybody else. The study of comparative religion produced “endless speculation on the differences and similarities between religions continually provided opportunities for modern Europeans to work out the issue of their own identity and to establish various perceptions of the relation between the legacy of Christianity on the one hand and modernity and rationality on the other.”<sup>88</sup> Comparative religion was the answer to the fear and uncertainty of 19th and early 20th century globalization.

The identity that Europe wished to encapsulate was that of a hegemonic power in their growing – or shrinking, depending on the point of view – world. The study of comparative religion “facilitated the conversation of the Eurohegemonic claim from one context to another – that is, from the older discourse of Christian supremacy (now considered bankrupt by many liberal Christians) to the new discourse of world religions, couched in the language of pluralism and diversity.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, European scholars wanted to make the same argument that they had been making for centuries – that Europe was inherently superior to other cultures – but found that in their newly globalized world, they had to approach the conversation from a less blatantly antagonistic standpoint. The narrative that was written to embody this newly created Western identity was

concocted largely on the basis of the unwarranted assumption of European hegemony, that is, on the basis of a monolithic universalist notion of history as a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 40

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 29

singular civilizing process, of which modern Europe was the triumphant vanguard and all other civilizations and non-European societies merely markers of various interim phases already surpassed by the people of European descent.<sup>90</sup>

The supposition that humanity possesses only a single path to civilization presupposes the idea that certain modes of being are intrinsically better than others. Not only that, but it presumes to make such a bold statement without any recognition of the bias that necessarily exists in such a claim. Another unsupported expectation of comparative religion used to support European hegemony was the notion that “Christianity was fundamentally different from all other religions, thus...beyond compare.”<sup>91</sup> This, once again, flawed presumption about the “singularity of Christianity

was often expressed in a vaguely oxymoronic phrase: ‘uniquely universal.’ In the opinion of the theological comparativists, Christianity alone was truly transhistorical and transnational in its import, hence universally valid and viable at any place anytime, whereas all other religions were particular, bound and shaped by geographical, ethnic, and other local contingencies.<sup>92</sup>

This assumption of uniqueness in the Christian tradition was the key to concurrently consolidating European identity while maintaining cultural ties with the church that did not threaten Europe’s scientific progress.

These Enlightenment attitudes were heavily shaped by a desire to emulate the lauded Ancient Greek society. The Greeks, in the European imagination, epitomized the rationality and values associated with an ‘advanced’ civilization. In fact, “most of the prized institutions of the modern West (science, art, rationality, democracy, etc.) were of Greek origin; this rendered religion (Christianity) a conspicuous anomaly amid the Hellenic pedigree of the European

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

heritage.”<sup>93</sup> This desire to model “the West” – a relatively new identifier – after the scientific rationality and “imagined glory” of the Greeks really became a cultural obsession.<sup>94</sup>

Unfortunately, this aspiration to align Western society with Grecian values and tradition had a lot to do with the racist wish to distance themselves ethnically from the Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam.<sup>95</sup>

After all, was it not reason – that faculty fully realized for the first time, purportedly, by the Greeks – that allowed the ancients to discern the true unity of myriad phenomena amid the multiplicity and diversity of a marvelously prolific nature? And, as some of the nineteenth-century hellenizing enthusiasts went on to suggest, was it not this discernment that became the foundation of science, the best system of governance, and art – in effect, the bona fide universals of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful? In contrast, monotheism, which was increasingly portrayed as a Semitic tendency, came to represent exclusivity (rejection of multiplicity) rather than universality (orderly embrace of multitudinous totality).<sup>96, 97</sup>

In the association of monotheism with the ethnographic label ‘Semitic’, we begin to see the connection of race to religion in addition to a need to portray Christianity as something more than just a regional or national tradition. The Greek propensity for discovering universality among the phenomena of human experience is a motivating factor for the science of comparative religions, which tries to uncover intrinsic links connecting the behaviors of various cultures.

Semitic cultures were cast as the opposite of everything the Greeks symbolized. From the beginning, the “modern discourse on religion and religions was...a discourse of secularization,”

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. xii

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. xiii

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> The irony of the situation is that - quite unbeknownst to most Europeans - the resurgence of Greek knowledge and ideals appeared in Western civilization thanks to a migration of Muslim people to Europe following the conquering of the Iberian peninsula in the 8th century. Islamic tradition, although often characterized otherwise in the Western popular media, strongly supports scientific inquiry as a way of understanding and appreciating God’s creation. Another misconception that many Westerners have is that the name of the god of Islam is ‘Allah.’ In fact, ‘allah’ is merely the Arabic translation for the word ‘god.’ Muslims believe in the same god described in the Torah and New Testament.

meaning that it wished to distance itself from the disciplines of theology and metaphysics; however, it was simultaneously an obvious “discourse of othering.”<sup>98</sup> Othering is the social tendency to fear that which is separate and different from oneself. In this case, the ‘science’ of comparative religions was used to justify an anti-Semitic prejudice predicated upon a historical tradition of othering. Essentially, “this scientifically based anti-Semitism facilitated a new expression of Europe’s age-old animosity toward the Islamic powers, insofar as this science categorized Jews and Arabs as being ‘of the same stock,’ conjointly epitomizing the character of the Semitic ‘race.’”<sup>99</sup> The seemingly arbitrary classification of Jews and Arabs as being the same race betrays a drastically incorrect yet nonetheless common supposition. This classification suggests that ‘Arab’ is synonymous with ‘Muslim,’ which is not the case, as hundreds of millions of Muslims live in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Africa. Using the term ‘Arab’ to describe all Muslims shows the racialized thought patterns that were used to other specifically Semitic people. Understanding this “devaluation of the Semitic” allows us to “begin to understand the new logic and renewed momentum behind the particularly harsh condemnation of Islam” that has existed in Europe since the 8th century conquest of the Iberian peninsula by Muslims.<sup>100</sup> In the science of comparative religions, “the zealously monotheistic, materially poor, mentally rigid, and socially illiberal desert Arab – already frequently described by nineteenth-century writers as ‘fanatic’ – has come to stand as the quintessential Muslim.”<sup>101</sup> It becomes plain that due to this conflation of Judaism and Islam with ‘fanatic’ monotheism, the discourse of secularization was necessarily one of othering. To be driven by religion was to not be driven by science and reason in the minds of comparativists. Determined to chart a course of pure rationality, Western scholars therefore

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<sup>98</sup> Masuzawa, p. 20

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

carried with them an extreme bias based upon racism when they examined and categorized the religions of the world. In order to separate Christianity racially and theologically from Judaism and Islam, Christianity was given the quality of universality, meaning that it could transcend time and space; if Christianity was not bound by the geographic and temporal limits of its historical context, then it could be considered fundamentally unlike traditions that were bound by those limits. This convenient – and to modern eyes, so unambiguously racialized and problematic – ideology arose from the “the scholastically untenable assumption that all religions are everywhere the same in essence, divergent and particular only in their ethnic, national, or racial expressions.”<sup>102</sup> In the words of European intellectual history and critical theory professor Tomoko Masuzawa, “This system [of comparing religions] has been closely associated with, and given its justification by, a racialized notion of ethnic difference.”<sup>103</sup> Cultural Darwinism cannot be comprehended without acknowledging the racist subtexts which it embodied.

The leap from original Darwinism to cultural Darwinism was not direct. In fact, the practice of appropriating Darwinism had a critical layover in linguistics. Philology, or the study of language as it exists in historical sources, was the first pseudo-science to make use of Darwin’s theory of evolution. In the globalized world of the 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars gained access to historical texts that had been previously unknown and unavailable to Western academia. For example, the Sanskrit texts of the Vedic tradition in India were of particular interest. Philologists compared the languages found in ancient manuscripts all over the world and created phylogenies to show their estimates of the relationships between the languages – both living and dead. Rather than tracking genetic mutations or observable phenotypic traits like naturalists (the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 3

original Darwinians), philologists used common root words with distinct endings as well as voiced inflection changes to mark out the relationships between languages.

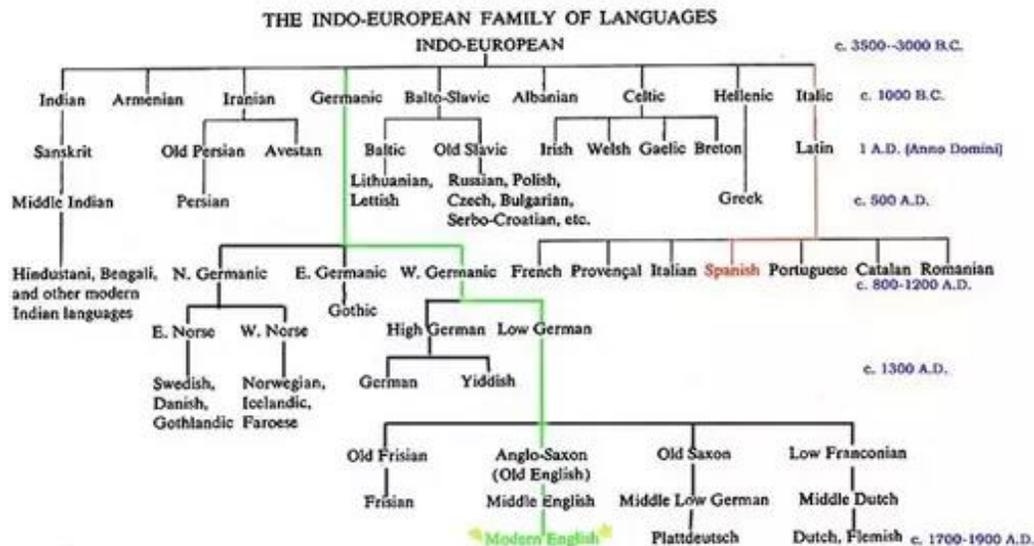


Figure B. This phylogeny illustrates the relationships between languages of the world belonging to the classification “Indo-European.”<sup>104</sup>

One of the reasons that comparative religion has such racist undertones is that philology propagated this understanding with its conclusions. They identified a linguistic ‘tribe’,

the Semitic languages, includ[ing] Arabic and Hebrew, which were well known to Europeans because they were the language of the Qur’an and the Old Testament respectively. The great majority of nineteenth-century philologists maintained that...[this] tribe of languages was decidedly imperfect and inchoate in inflectional capability, and with this imperfection came all the limitations that characterized their native speakers as a race.<sup>105</sup>

This blatantly racist justification for categorization and use of language to justify racism carried over into cultural Darwinism. Notice that the phylogeny above conveniently shows an

<sup>104</sup> “Indo-European Family of Languages,” accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>105</sup> Masuzawa, p. 25

evolutionary relationship between Greek and English, and yet the Semitic languages are not even depicted. The philologists passed on the idea that this practice of appropriating Darwinism was an academically sound practice, which it was not. While the “parallels between organic and linguistic evolution are indeed pronounced,” the two processes are influenced by vastly different factors.<sup>106</sup> Organic evolution – Darwin’s original theory – is subject to natural selection while linguistic evolution is not.<sup>107</sup> The “deep grammatical properties” of language are “constrained by a system of parameters” that has no effect upon natural evolution.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, philology was taken to be a legitimate science by the European scholarly community.

Inspired by the ‘science’ of philology, cultural anthropologists took Darwin’s theory and applied it to human cultures. They created phylogenies of religion that were incredibly prejudiced (see *Figure C.*) These phylogenies were used to rationalize patronizing views of ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ religions. They were wrong to do so both logically and ethically. The Darwinian phylogenies do not conclude that any one species is more advanced than any other. Cultural Darwinism, on the other hand, propagated the idea of European hegemony. It suggested that world religions matured from primitive to advanced, and they presumed that Christianity was naturally the most superior of these religious traditions. They categorized religions by the size of the society in which they occurred:

If the society in question was small and ‘tribal’ in its scale and lacked the technology of writing, it would be an object of study for anthropology. If on the other hand, the society happened to be a large-scale, regionally dominant kingdom or empire and had a long and illustrious written tradition, it would fall under the aegis of Orientalism.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Martin Lewis and Asya Pereltsvaig. “Linguistic Phylogenies Are Not the Same as Biological Phylogenies,” *GeoCurrents*, 17 Oct 2012

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Masuzawa, p. 15

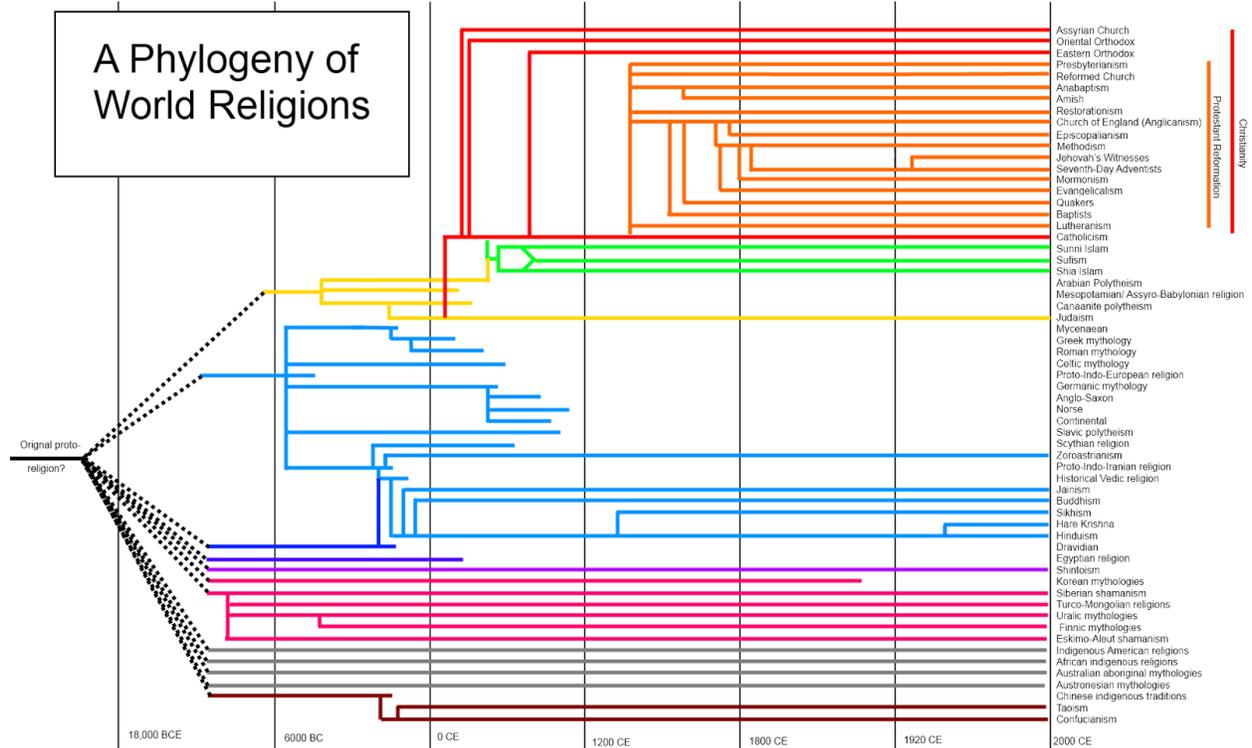


Figure C. Although difficult to read, this phylogeny shows the relationships between extinct and extant (still existing) religions of the world on the vertical axis and a timescale from 18,000 BCE to 2000 CE on the horizontal axis. This phylogeny portrays extant denominations of Christianity in red and orange (top 19 lines), Islam in green (next 3 lines), Judaism in yellow (next line), Asian religions in blue (next 6 lines), and indigenous traditions in purple, pink, grey, and maroon (bottom 12 lines).<sup>110, 111</sup>

Religions studied by anthropology generally garnered the title ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ in reference to their perceived lack of Western sophistication and rationale, keeping in mind that this comparative religion study was meant to define the West through the relative characteristics of the other society. While anthropology was used to examine small, non-Christian religions, political science, sociology, and economics

became viable and effective ways of understanding European society because this society had finally reached maturity, that is, had sufficiently developed in accordance with rational principles and established itself on the basis of the rule

<sup>110</sup> “A Phylogeny of World Religions,” accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>111</sup> One can’t help but notice the irony of Christianity being placed literally at the top of this diagram.

of law, instead of on some real or imagined supernatural authority. In contrast, every region of the nonmodern non-West was presumed to be thoroughly in the grip of religion, as all aspect of life were supposedly determined and dictated by an archaic metaphysics of the magical and the supernatural. In the case of preliterate tribal society, it was assumed that the dominant metaphysics would be a form of natural religion, that is, a moral universe saturated by supernatural and autochthonous powers, a cosmology deeply ingrained in the landscape, the cycle of seasons, and the natural rhythms of life. As we know, this type of assumption concerning tribal-scale society induced many anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to concentrate their attention on what they were inclined to identify as ‘religion’, in order to find therein some obscure logic or arcane ‘prelogical’ system of thought presumably governing all aspects of tribal life.<sup>112</sup>

This popular style of imagining the world “laid grounds for academic legitimization of the pluralist discourse of world religions.”<sup>113</sup> Early 20th century religion scholar Stanley Cook states, “Indeed the whole history of religion reveals a continuous process of change in the world’s religions whether in the more primitive or in the more advanced stages,” making the position of linear progression from primitive to advanced so clear you’d have to wear a blindfold not to see it.<sup>114</sup> John Arnott MacCulloch, another religion scholar from the very early 1900s, “blithely opines that ‘the aspects of savage religion do not vary greatly wherever it is found,’ and on that ground, he suggests, a general treatment of them as a type would ‘ensure better acquaintance with religion at a low level than a separate account of each savage race would do.’”<sup>115</sup> Cook and MacCulloch summarily demonstrate the general attitudes of the time period held by scholars, anthropologists, and any who saw cultural Darwinism as a way to place themselves within the framework of a newly globalized society.

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<sup>112</sup> Masuzawa, p. 16

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 22

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 44

## **The Symposium:**

All the factors that created the comparative religion movement are evident in the 1930 symposium. These elements are not explicitly stated by the symposium speakers. Rather, they are the strong, deadly undercurrents that direct the flow of thought. The themes of scientific superiority, goal-oriented evolution, eugenics, attitudes about non-Christian religions, and subjective truth will be used to show how a hierarchical paradigm that prioritized Western culture over others was in play.

## Greek Rationality

One fallacious theme of the symposium was the assertion that scientific knowledge indicates an inherently better human existence. In an attempt to emulate their classical Greek heroes of logic, these “socially militant scientists” tended to use “scientific rationalism as the key to social reform.”<sup>116</sup> Professor Julian Huxley demonstrates this tactic with the assertion that “what science can and should do is to modify the form of religion. It is the *duty* of religion to accept and assimilate scientific knowledge...If religion refuses to do so she will lose influence and adherents.”<sup>117</sup> He argues that scientific technologies are the “only means by which man can go on increasing his power over nature and over the destiny of his race.”<sup>118</sup> When it comes to the relationship between religion and science, he characterizes it as commensalistic. In the biological field, commensalism describes a relationship between two organisms in which one benefits and the other is unaffected. To be clear, he makes the distinction that

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<sup>116</sup> Peter J. Bowler. *Reconciling Science and Religion: the Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain*. Chicago, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 17

<sup>117</sup> Huxley et al., p. 166

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1

I do not mean that science should dictate to religion how it should change or what form it should take. I mean that it is the business and the duty of the various religions to accept the new knowledge we owe to science, to assimilate it into their systems, and to adjust their general ideas and outlook accordingly.<sup>119</sup>

In this model, religion receives the benefit of scientific truth but science remains unchanged by religion. He rationalizes this view by explaining how “scientific discoveries have entirely altered our general picture of the universe and of man’s position in it.”<sup>120</sup> Taking his logic a step further, it becomes clear that any communities or cultures that did not accept scientific knowledge could be categorized as less-than communities that did. Dr. L. P. Jacks maintains that “no one who willfully neglects the teachings of science can live the good life.”<sup>121</sup> He associates science with the good life, therefore societies that do not have science must necessarily not lead the good life. Societies without technology would have been, at the time, mainly non-Christian. Moreover, Huxley, who was the first Director General of UNESCO, did not believe that these non-Christian societies needed scientific education specifically because of their ethnicity and class.<sup>122</sup> Using science to justify ordering societies from worst to best is just one of the many ways these speakers rationalized racism.

### Divinely Inspired Evolution

One of the weightiest reasons why using Darwinism to describe humanity is a mistake is the fact that Darwin’s theory did not include a goal. Evolution by natural selection does not claim that any one species is more advanced than another; it does not even claim that species

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 2

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 159

<sup>122</sup> *Julian Huxley, Biologist and Statesman of Science: Proceedings of a conference held at Rice University 25-27 September 1987*, edited by C. Kenneth Waters, Albert Van Helden. (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992)

alive today are necessarily better than those that were alive millions of years ago and have since gone extinct. Cultural Darwinists, on the other hand, firmly believed that evolution was goal-driven. This myth of human progress – the idea that humanity inevitably moves in a positive direction – was used to justify racist hierarchies under European hegemony. This view of evolution indicated that there was a divine purpose associated with evolution, a godly ideal towards which humanity was moving.<sup>123</sup> Canon B. H. Streeter represents this Modernist understanding of the “human race as the supreme expression of God’s will on earth.” Professor S. Alexander professed in his 1920 book, *Space, Time, and Deity*, that the revelation of God would indicate that evolution had reached its final stage.<sup>124</sup> Professor Sir J. Arthur Thomson maintains that

our new world excels that of our forefathers in its grandeur, its orderliness, its beauty, its revelation of advance or progress...Here we partly mean that, just as we have become accustomed scientifically to see Man in the light of evolution, so philosophically we must try to see evolution in the light of Man.<sup>125</sup>

Thomson’s way of merging his scientific and religious viewpoints was to use evolution as an alternative creation narrative: “The religious doctrine of creation implies the belief that the institution of the Order of Nature expressed a Divine Purpose or Idea; it is not inconsistent with this to hold also to the scientific view that the mode of the Becoming has been evolutionary.”<sup>126</sup> Believing that evolution is a divine process is not inherently evil; the conflict arises when Thomson describes the modern culture as more advanced than that of our forefathers or when Streeter and Alexander turn a purportedly secular scientific theory into a Christian doctrine. This description implies a ranking of societies by quality, which is ethically problematic and leads to

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<sup>123</sup> Bowler, p. 130

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 74

<sup>125</sup> Huxley et al., p. 31-32

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 29

racist ideologies. Appropriating science, which itself claims to be unbiased and universally applicable, as Christian dogma excludes non-Christian communities from various forms of empirical knowledge and any benefits derived from new technologies.<sup>127</sup>

## Eugenics

A result of viewing humanity as part of a goal-oriented evolution was the scientific discipline of eugenics. The Right Rev. Barnes, Bishop of Birmingham, inspired to help humanity achieve the ideal towards which he believed it to be inevitably moving, advocated for applied eugenics, or “selective breeding for humanity.”<sup>128</sup> The Modernists, bolstered by the “hope of human progress” saw it as their “Christian duty to further the spiritual progress of the race, and if this meant following a eugenic policy to weed of the genetically unfit, so be it.”<sup>129</sup> Huxley, particularly well known for his research in eugenics, “remained convinced throughout his life that evolution was progressive and that the human race represented its most important outcome.”<sup>130, 131</sup> He proclaims that “human mental powers now allowed us to take charge of the evolutionary process, thus endowing us with immense responsibility.”<sup>132</sup> This assumption of reasonability begs the question, “The responsibility to do what?” In the case of these symposium men, the answer is the responsibility to ensure the progress of the human race in the right direction. The Very Rev W. R. Inge sums up this problematic view of evolution as the “ascent

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<sup>127</sup> The claim that science is unbiased is also problematic and not quite true. The difference between science and philosophy is that the upstanding scientific community has protocols in place to make empirical research as unbiased as possible.

<sup>128</sup> Bowler, p. 260

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 247

<sup>130</sup> Waters, p. 3

<sup>131</sup> Bowler, p. 150

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 152

of man from lower forms.”<sup>133</sup> He was convinced that the “white races” were “doomed” to failure and obliteration “unless they could prevent the proliferation of the unfit.”<sup>134</sup> He, like Barnes, thought that “to purify the race in this way [through eugenics] was a Christian duty.”<sup>135</sup> Roughly translated from its Greek root words, the term ‘eugenics’ means ‘true-born’ or ‘well-born.’<sup>136</sup> This specific science is devoted to identifying and reproducing desirable traits in human populations; a similar practice, artificial selection, is used in agriculture, animal farming, and breeding domesticated animals such as dogs and horses. More than with artificial, eugenics incurs some serious ethical barriers.<sup>137</sup> The most prominent example of the dark side of eugenics is the Holocaust; the Nazis demonstrated how a subjective truth about desired characteristics had far reaching and very real consequences for literally millions of people. This dark side of eugenics is not taken so far (as in, they did not actually murder a whole bunch of people) by the symposium speakers, but the threat of prioritizing particular groups of people over others remains present. Moreover, because Darwin’s theory of evolution does not presuppose a purpose or end-goal, the application of Darwinism in eugenics as proposed by these men is logically flawed. Evolution does not move in a particular, guided direction – not according to purely scientific principles, anyway. Therefore, to interpret evolution as goal-oriented is a sign of cultural Darwinism; to take on the mantle of the purification of the human race is a sign of arrogance and dubious morality.

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<sup>133</sup> Huxley et al., p. 146

<sup>134</sup> Bowler, p. 272

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “eugenics,” accessed 10 May 2017

<sup>137</sup> Recently, artificial selection has come under fire in regards to GMOs (genetically modified organisms). On the one hand, GMOs have been proven to be enormously beneficial in providing enough food for an exponentially expanding population in India and helping prevent Malaria in Africa. On the other hand, GMO crops have also had unforeseen but devastating effects on the agricultural practices of Native Hawaiians.

## Non-Christian Religions

One of the surest signs of a cultural Darwinian perspective is disparaging commentary about non-Christian religions. Combining the scientific superiority complex with goal-driven evolution creates a dichotomy between Western culture and the rest of the world. Throughout this discussion, buzzwords like primitive and savage illustrate the condescending attitude the symposium speakers portrayed. When Professor B. Malinowski, for example, describes non-Christian religions, he uses terms such as “primitive”, “savage”/ “mere savages”, “superstitious”, and “heathendom.”<sup>138</sup> Barnes concurrently mentions “fundamentalists and magic-mongers,” which, given the historical context, likely refer respectively to Muslims and small society, non-Christian religions.<sup>139</sup>

Generally, referring to non-Christian religious traditions as having to do with magic or superstition is a sign that these cultures were viewed as non-rational and therefore less sophisticated than scientific, Christian, Western cultures. In everyday parlance, “the more ‘traditional’ the society, the greater the role religion plays within it – or so we presume, regardless of how much or how little we happen to know about the society in question or about its supposed tradition.”<sup>140</sup> The assumption here is that if a society is seemingly more concerned with religion, then they must be less concerned with science, they therefore must have a less nuanced view of the world, and hence should not be taken seriously. Further, these cultures are usually categorized as bad while Christianity alone receives the categorization good. This Modernist position which imagined magic in opposition to religion, or merely as a precursor to ‘true’ religion, derived from a

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<sup>138</sup> Huxley et al, p. 65-81

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 57

<sup>140</sup> Masuzawa, p. 1

denial of the supernatural, allow[ing] humanity to portray itself in a new light – no longer a sinful race facing judgment, but the agent of God’s power on earth, with the ability to push spiritual progress forward by its own efforts. Christ became the perfect human, a model for what we may all become in the future if we follow his teachings, not a supernatural agent with miraculous powers.<sup>141</sup>

This rationale demonstrates the unspoken desire to use logical thought to distance Western culture from traditions that subscribed to a paradigm involving a miraculous deity, namely the Jewish and Islamic traditions, as discussed earlier. Streeter displays this attitude saying, “What man *wants* to do is largely a matter of whether or no he has a religion, and whether that religion is a good one or a bad.”<sup>142</sup> He describes how some of his contemporaries would argue that “among savage peoples religion is often an advantage, even though connected with superstitious beliefs and with practices repellent to civilised man.” He qualifies this statement by remarking that “no religion which rests on superstition can aspire to guide mankind in the right direction at this crucial stage in the history of human progress.”<sup>143</sup> Alexander illustrates the imaginary phylogeny created by cultural Darwinism. He suggests that religion may have arisen from magic, and might still be somewhat intertwined: “Hence the barbarity and childishness that may disfigure the practice of religious rites; and its confusion with magic, from which it may not wholly yet have risen free.”<sup>144</sup> The most obvious sign yet of cultural Darwinism is the prioritization of Christianity over other religious traditions. Huxley explicates this prioritization as he describes a “development in religion” from traditions that are “primitive and crude...degenerate...cruel or unenlightened” to those that are “advanced and

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<sup>141</sup> Bowler, p. 247

<sup>142</sup> Huxley et al., p. 95

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 139

elaborate...progressive...noble and beautiful.”<sup>145</sup> This extremely colored judgment leaves no room for doubt about his cultural Darwinism.

Thinking about religion and the ‘evolution’ of religion as originating from a superstitious, magic-practicing society is rather Freudian. H. R. L. Sheppard, the Dean of Canterbury, comments, “Scientific truth has indeed set men free...from the haunting tyranny of ancient fears and superstitions.”<sup>146</sup> Freud theorizes in his treatise, *The Future of an Illusion*, about how religion must have originated due to humanity’s fear of that which cannot be explained, the fear of the unknown.<sup>147</sup> Consider natural phenomena like thunder and lightning: in the past, Freud argues, these must have seemed like manifestations of an angry god. In rational modernity, the terrifying unknown becomes understandable and the need for a supernatural explanation disappears.<sup>148</sup> Freud’s theories about religion were comparativist and reflected an evolutionary view of humankind. This warped view of evolution, in this case, is being used by the symposium speakers to back up the idea that God’s Divine plan involves inevitable human progress away from magical, superstitious societies.<sup>149</sup>

Considering magic and religion on a similar playing field flew in the face of the Western-dominated paradigm that the symposium speakers promoted. Some well-known religion scholars, such as Emile Durkheim, whose theories are studied in academia to this day, advocate for the intellectual separation of religion and magic.<sup>150</sup> However, a significant discussion has since emerged in the modern discourse of religion scholarship that strongly opposes this archaic standpoint and considers magic to be a valid form of religious practice. Stolow, for instance,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 84

<sup>147</sup> Sigmund Freud and James Strachey. *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1975)

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Although Freud would probably have disagreed with this application.

<sup>150</sup> Durkheim believes that religion is practiced communally whereas magic is done individually, therefore barring magic from being considered religious practice.

writes about “*technologies of enchantment*” which are “strategies used by human beings to exert control over the thoughts and actions of other human beings.”<sup>151</sup> Such technologies could include church rituals – which Barnes, for one, vehemently opposed – or political rhetoric or scientific theories or magical practices. Stolow describes the “performance of modern technoscience” as resembling a “system of magical or religious action.”<sup>152</sup> These performances work to achieve similar goals through apparently different paths. His purposeful choice in displaying the interchangeability of magic and religion portrays the modern sentiment which the symposium speakers do not share. For them, the issue with considering magic and religion on a similar plane is that the universe would turn into a “cosmos that far more resembles the one perceived ‘primitively’ as a relatively undifferentiated order of humans, gods, animals and the diverse forms of equipment that tie them together.”<sup>153</sup> This undifferentiated order would not be useful to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century folk who were trying to establish a European identity based on unbalanced power structures.

### Subjective Truth

This whole discussion boils down to subjective truth. Professor Sir Arthur S. Eddington illustrates the importance of truth itself when he says, “If we go right back to the beginning [of the universe] the first thing we must recognise in the world is something intent on truth – something to which it matters intensely that belief should be true.”<sup>154</sup> The symposium speakers revealed their attitude of cultural superiority in their discussion of truth. The claim that a subjective truth should be accepted as the one and only absolute truth by all immediately implies

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<sup>151</sup> Stolow, p. 189

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 194

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Huxley et al., p. 119

an underlying superiority complex. Professor J. S. Haldane speaks about God as the “Personality of personalities” and professes the opinion that “revelation of God” comes only through exploration “within ourselves, in our active ideals of truth, right, charity, and beauty, and consequent fellowship with others.”<sup>155</sup> These markers that he uses to describe his experience of God – right and beauty, for example – are presented in a manner that suggests he believes that these concepts can be objectively true in a world far too complicated for that possibility. The Rev C. W. O’Hara echoes this sentiment when he says that religion “teaches with certainty the vital truths concerning man’s development in this world in order that he may reach a final state of perfection.”<sup>156</sup> Malinowski connects the veracity of the “religious truth” of Christianity to the ethically incorrect attitude about other religious traditions.<sup>157</sup> He cautions the, “I do not want you to forget all that is crude, cruel, and degraded in the religions of the savages.”<sup>158</sup> Barnes drives home this fallacy of truth with the idea of “true religion,” by default implying that he believes that religions have the ability to be declared to be false and that he thinks he has the authority to do so.<sup>159</sup> This arrogance of cultural superiority is at the heart of cultural Darwinism. Only with this flawed foundation does the house of cards that cultural Darwinists built into the science of comparative religions make the slightest bit of sense.

## Conclusion

Believing subjective truths to be absolute convinced ‘experts’ of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century thought they could take Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection and apply it to human cultures; they did this in a way that reinforced a racist, Western hegemony that solidified their

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 47

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 116

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 69

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 75

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 57

cultural identity in a politically and existentially shaky world. Understanding the historical and social factors of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain matters because a field of study, the science of comparative religions, was born from these ideas and continues to propagate racist ideologies today. However, the science of comparative religion is not in fact a science at all. An incredible amount of bias goes into this field and goes unacknowledged by its ‘scientists’. The supremacy of broadcast radio practically ensured that this 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century message would reach clear into the present.

To recapitulate, in the 1930s, broadcast radio, was one of the relatively new mechanical inventions that kept Britain afloat during the Great Depression and subsequently developed a massive public influence. Colonies were demanding autonomy, and the British government underwent remarkable internal changes while it dealt with various global tensions. Regarding radio, the social implications of its status as a broadcasting monopoly combined with the general awe and mystery surrounding the device itself allowed BBC Director General Reith to mold his new corporation into guiding moral light for the British people – at least, such was the intention. As a religious technology, broadcast radio provided a medium for the people to interact in new ways with the ideologies expressed in the 1930 symposium. The effect of using the radio to disseminate this symposium was twofold: first, it indicates to modern researchers the general mood of the academics at the time due to radio’s capability to act as a sort of mirror to cultural norms, and second, it amplified the views of the symposium speakers back to the people and thereby altered the public culture. The message that radio spread so widely was one of cultural Darwinism. A crisis involving settling Europe’s position in the modern world determined what the field of comparative religion was to become. The stain of colonialism, the desire to emulate the Enlightenment rationality embodied by the Ancient Greeks, and the new field of philology

rationalized a deep-rooted racism within the mindset of those wishing to use comparative religion as a way to understand the world.

Today in the United States, not much has changed. We still face economic, political, and social turmoil. We are still recovering from the Recession, and the national debt rises every day. Fear abounds on all sides – fear of the ‘other’ expressed through Islamophobia and anti-Semitism; fear of autocratic, conservative, populist political figures like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen; fear that a globalized society will change (or has already changed) the United States’ position as a leading world power. The perceived animosity between religion and science continues, for instance, in the debates about the reality of climate change, and mass communication technologies like the internet and television reinforce polarizing political ideologies.<sup>160</sup> It is the responsibility of scientists and religion scholars today to not allow these factors to create similar mistakes to the ones exemplified by the cultural Darwinists in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

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<sup>160</sup> John Wihbey. “Does Facebook drive political polarization? Data science and research.” *Journalist’s Resource*, 7 May 2015

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