

PHIL 502

Seminar 1

The Academic Study of Religion
Part 2: Frazer

James Frazer (1854-1941)

- Scotsman, educated at Cambridge. Studied Plato and Greek folklore. Intrigued by Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and anthropology. He was either an atheist or an agnostic.

James Frazer (1854-1941)

- Key text: *The Golden Bough* (begun in 1890. 1915 – final version)
- Gives origin of religion in an examination of the history of mythology, folklore and legends.

Frazer's view of religion

- Very similar to Tylor
- Evolutionary process
- Early belief in magic

Frazer's view of religion

- Difference: He believes that the failures of the early magicians led them to reject the principles of magic (i.e., imitation and contact)

Frazer's view of religion

- New claim: the real powers behind the natural world are personalities not principles.
- So, instead of using magic spells, there is a turn toward prayers addressed to one's favorite gods and goddesses.

Frazer's view of religion

- Religion became highly *anthropomorphic*: dealing with the gods was the same as dealing with a human person (ask favors, make a vow of love or loyalty).

Frazer's view of religion

At bottom:

Religion is the belief in
supernatural beings.

Frazer's view of religion

Hierarchy:

- magician-king (most primitive)
- priest-king
- divine king (ruler)