INTRODUCTION

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The main aim of this book is to present the life and career of one of anthropology's most important ancestors, William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), in the context of the history of anthropology and the development of different anthropological concepts. Following his early interest in the sacrifice of animals and plants, totemism, and the study of kinship and marriage in Early Arabia, Smith was one of the scholars who profoundly influenced the development and establishment of anthropology as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century. He drew from the theories of kinship at the time, while they were being established and formulated, and insisted on the importance of totemism. His concept of the relationship between myth and ritual influenced generations of scholars, both in anthropology and sociology, and in the so-called "myth and ritual school." That is why his influence on the studies of the relationship between myth and ritual will take a significant part of the present book—especially since the connections between him and especially Scandinavian "myth-ritualists" have so far been ignored.

Although respected and studied, especially since the 1990s,[1] Smith has a somewhat paradoxical position in the history of social and cultural anthropology.[2] Anthropologists educated in the twentieth century admire him, but many contemporary scholars are not quite sure what to make of him. This is the result of the lack of understanding of the extent of his influence on scholars such as Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941)—a close friend who dedicated the first edition of *The Golden Bough* to Smith,[3] Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), Bronislaw

Malinowski (1884–1942), Sir E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973),[4] and their followers.[5] As a matter of fact, Durkheim was very clear in acknowledging his debt to Smith in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*—and he even went as far as to claim that he changed the way in which he saw religion, after having read Smith's *Lectures* in 1895 (Maryanski 2014: 354; Isambert 1976: 41). According to a historian of anthropology and archaeology, Durkheim was decisively influenced by Smith in developing "the idea that periodic forms of ceremony were vital in sustaining the individual's commitment to the community" (Gosden 1999: 77). Also very important is Smith's influence on the whole development of the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane* among the whole generation of French scholars (as claimed by Borgeaud 1994: 594). Unsurprisingly, given his own appreciation by (as well as his influence on) Durkheim, Smith's work was also very highly regarded by one of the most important social anthropologists of the twentieth century, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). This is obvious from the following observation reprinted in a collection of essays published several years after Radcliffe-Brown died: "Important contributions to social anthropology were made by historians such as Fustel de Coulanges, Henry Maine and Robertson Smith. The last named writer is particularly important as the pioneer in the sociological study of religion in his work on early Semitic religion" (Radcliffe-Brown 1958: 161). Finally, and for quite some time, there have been a number of scholars who point to the extent to which the founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), was also influenced by some of Smith's ideas about totem and sacrifice (Rieff 1954: 529; Jones 1980: 512; Segal 2000: 261; Booth 2002)—especially in the fourth part of his seminal work, *Totem and Taboo* (chapter titled "The Return of Totemism in Childhood").[6]

After Radcliffe-Brown, another notable twentieth-century anthropologist who fully appreciated the importance and relevance of Smith's work was Dame Mary Douglas (1921–2007). In her classic work *Purity and Danger* (1966: 24, quoted by Sharpe 1986: 81), she compared Smith's ideas to the ones of the founder of modern anthropology, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor

(1832–1917): "Whereas Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore [*sic*]: Robertson Smith founded social anthropology."[7] Perhaps she gave Smith a little bit more credit than he deserves (the claim that he "founded social anthropology" seems a bit too generous), but it certainly points to the extent of his influence. For example, Malinowski was very much impressed by his insistence on observing what people actually do (as opposed to what they believe in—as noted by his biographer Michael Young [2004: 235]).[8] In the last couple of decades, and especially following the publication of the papers delivered at the William Robertson Smith Congress in April 1994 (Johnstone 1995), there has been quite a bit of renewed interest in Smith's work and legacy. For example, in Tim Ingold's inaugural lecture, in 2003, as the Chair in Social Anthropology was being re-established at the University of Aberdeen, he referred to Smith as "a giant of scholarship" (2004: 184). At the same time, Ingold also emphasized on Smith's arguments in opposition to what the founder of social anthropology, Tylor, claimed about "primitive beliefs" (Ingold 2004: 186–187). Unfortunately, Smith is absent from the otherwise quite extensive *Biographical Dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Amit 2004), but it seems that an interest in his work has intensified in the last decade. More recently, the leading historian of contemporary social anthropology, Adam Kuper, also pointed to Smith's importance for the development of the emerging scholarly discipline and its relationship to the study of the Bible (2016: 7–10).

When it comes to the specific biographical details about Smith's life, very little can be added to the classic early texts, such as Black and Chrystal's detailed biography (1912a), or the abridged version as presented by Bryce (1903). These key texts are referred to in all the subsequent dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.—whenever Smith's name is mentioned. His sister, Alice Thiele Smith, the only child from the family who married and had her own children, left a beautifully written memoir about growing up in mid-nineteenth-century Aberdeenshire (Thiele

Smith 2004). For readers interested in more specific aspects of Smith's theological work, Maier (2009) offers impressive details of his correspondence with Wellhausen, and he also presents a detailed account of Smith's communication with (and influences by) contemporary German scholars in the second half of the nineteenth century (2009: 86ff.). I should also mention that a special issue of the *Journal of Scottish Thought* was dedicated to him and published in 2008. Smith's papers and correspondence are available in the archives at the Cambridge University Library, Christ's College at Cambridge, University of Aberdeen, and University College London. As the technology develops, and the need to preserve the legacy of past scholarship is considered increasingly important; in recent years, many of his books have been made available in digital format—making his ideas much more accessible than they were several decades ago. This is to a great extent due to the efforts of his family, as can be seen on the website https://william-robertson-smith.net/en/.

However, the main reason for writing this book is the reconsideration and proper evaluation of Smith as one of the most important ancestors of anthropology, placing him firmly within the history of our discipline. This is not another biography of William Robertson Smith—the biographies by Black and Chrystal and by Maier are very good. This book is more like a journey through anthropology and related disciplines with Smith as the guide. The main aim of this book is to demonstrate specific examples of his influence on the development and establishment of some key concepts of social anthropology, such as totemism. I am interested in the reception of different concepts, as well as the ways they have been reinterpreted. As already mentioned above, and as will become obvious in the following pages, I find especially significant the anthropological study of myth, and it is easy to see the general influence that Smith's ideas had on some very important anthropologists, as well as on different representatives of the myth and ritual school. Although the extent of Smith's importance has already been recognized from the early twentieth century, there was still an impressive omission in studying the extent to which members of the so-called "Uppsala school" (primarily

Scandinavian scholars) were themselves influenced by his views on myth and ritual, and later developed further some of Smith's ideas—not only about the relationship between myth and ritual, but also his concept of the "comparative study of religion."[9] There are also some important (mis)conceptions about anthropology's ancestors (Smith included), and I intend to show how some twentieth-century critical assessments of his work (like the one on "Smith the Orientalist") were not based on facts, but on very particular readings, intentionally taken out of context.

In the first part of this book, I will present a brief overview of Smith's life—focusing on his relationship with some other notable ancestors of anthropology. At the same time, it should be stressed that Smith saw himself not only as a theologian, but also (and, in my view, primarily) as a scientist who was trying to *rationally* explain behavior and beliefs of the peoples that he studied, using the most advanced scientific theories of his time. Smith's whole career coincides with the industrial revolution and the epoch of great scientific advances and great discoveries, which led nineteenth-century scholars to believe that everything can be explained. His first teaching experience was also in the area of natural sciences. The fact is, after all, that Smith originally won a bursary for mathematics, and immediately afterward studied natural sciences. This aspect of his work (his so-called "formative years") was explored in great detail in Gordon K. Booth's admirable PhD thesis, defended at the University of Aberdeen (1999). In his work, Booth clearly demonstrates the extent to which Smith's ideas should be considered in the context of the social, cultural, and historical conditions of the time, the mid-nineteenth-century Scottish cultural and academic milieu, and Smith's own character (he was always eager to enter into a vigorous debate, especially when he was younger—and sometimes even on behalf of his teachers or mentors), as well as in light of the specific individuals with whom he worked and socialized. All of these elements influenced his views and ideas—as well as their immediate reception by his peers or critics.

I will then turn to his fieldwork experience—against the commonly held (and factually wrong) view that Smith (as well as

some of his more famous contemporaries, like Tylor) was an "armchair anthropologist"—focusing on his ethnographic accounts from several trips to Egypt and the Arabian peninsula, primarily through his notes and observations published in the journals and magazines of his time. This fieldwork experience makes Smith a little bit unusual and at the same time quite original for the time when he lived and worked (when it was believed that firsthand field observations were mostly reserved for adventurers, travelers, or missionaries)—but very modern and contemporary in other aspects. As far as I know, letters from Smith's travel to Sicily and Egypt have never been reprinted since their original publication in the *Scotsman*.

I will then proceed with a brief discussion of his view on myth and ritual, and follow it by tracing how his idea of their relationship developed in anthropology well into 1970s and 1980s. After all, "Smith remains the pioneering myth-ritualist because he was the first to propose that the earliest myths arose in connection with rituals" (Segal 1998: 3). In order to fully grasp the significance of his work, it is also important to provide a brief outline of the ways in which some other scholars who have approached the study of myth wrote about it and explained it before the late nineteenth century.

I will also point to some important works of several Scandinavian scholars (plus one British American), who further developed some of Smith's key ideas (especially from his studies of the Old Testament, as well as his methodology of Biblical criticism) in the first half of the twentieth century. Even though Smith was not always referred to, and neither was he properly referenced, his work and his ideas were obviously present in their work. It will become obvious that the extent of Smith's influence has been vastly underappreciated, and I hope to be able to demonstrate this influence not only in the studies of religious (and spiritual) aspects of human life, but also in our understanding of the social aspects—especially when it comes to the uses of myth and ritual in historical and political contexts.

In the final part of this book, I will deal with some more sociological aspects of Smith's work—primarily when it comes

to the relationship that people *as members of societies* have with the political (as well as social, cultural, etc.) institutions of their societies—this means people as members of "nations," different ethnic groups, or participants in "national cultures." In writing about these connections, Smith was again well ahead of his time, and his work preceded some important contemporary anthropologists interested in understanding the "myths of the state" (Goody 1968; Kapferer 1988; Bošković 2013).

NOTES

1. Among the critical studies of his work, see, e.g., Brown 1964; Beidelman 1974a; Nelson 1969, 1973; and Bailey 1970. An excellent critique of Smith's views on religion was offered by Warburg (1989).

2. This is the case primarily in the American anthropological tradition. Actually, he is the only nineteenth-century anthropologist who is very highly regarded among British social anthropologists (Sharpe 1986: 81). Except for Beidelman, all the scholars who have been mentioned in the first note are not anthropologists.

3. Although by 1900, when the second edition of *The Golden Bough* was published, he had changed his mind, and explicitly rejected the observations (by the leading French scholars of religion and ritual of that time, Mauss and Hubert) that he had been influenced by Smith (Ackerman 2008: 73).

   On the other hand, his biographer claims that Frazer was decisively influenced by meeting "an even more brilliant jewel in Scotland's intellectual crown, the theologian and historian of Semitic religion William Robertson Smith" (Ackerman 2015: 2).

4. See also Beidelman 1974b: 558. Thomas Beidelman (1974b: 562) also refers to Evans-Pritchard's statement (although, as he noted, not put in print) that the concept of segmentary societies derived from Smith's *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, published in 1885, as well as from Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*, published in 1861.

5. With the exception of important studies by Jones (1984) and Ackerman (1973, 1991). In another book, Jones (2005: 3) claims that matters are more complicated, and that Durkheim actually did not refer to Smith, but to Frazer instead, in the years following his "discovery" of Smith's method, after 1895. For me, this comes down to whether one would believe Durkheim (as I do), or Jones.

6. On the other hand, and without getting into a detailed discussion of this topic here, it could also be argued that Freud (2001: 119–122) actually refers to Smith's works through the lens of J. G. Frazer, who had radically different views about the place and the role of totems in society. Some aspects that Freud (2001: 154) mentions ("primal horde," "death of the father," sibling rivalry) actually come from other authors (Darwin, Atkinson, and other psychoanalysts such as Ferenczi and Rank), and Smith's contribution to his book ("totem meal") occupies a relatively minor place.

    Freud was very methodical in his writing, and always sought to include the most relevant and the most up to date ethnographic accounts to illustrate his theories.

7. Sharpe immediately notes that "Tylor, of course, did not found folklore." In all fairness to Tylor, he himself refers to the new discipline that he was writing about as *ethnography* (Tylor 1871, vol. 1: 1). Of course, this is the time period (the second half of the nineteenth century) when terms such as "anthropology," "ethnology," and "ethnography" were all used interchangeably—and sometimes even by the same scholars in the same texts (Bošković 2010).

8. This is the point I will return to when discussing his idea of the primacy of ritual over myth.

9. The only exception is Segal's work, especially the anthology that he edited (1998). It is somewhat strange that this excellent volume has been out of print for quite some time. That might be at least in part because contemporary anthropologists (and social scientists in general) tend to stay away from reading texts about myths and religion—unlike their colleagues who wrote about the same topics before World War II.