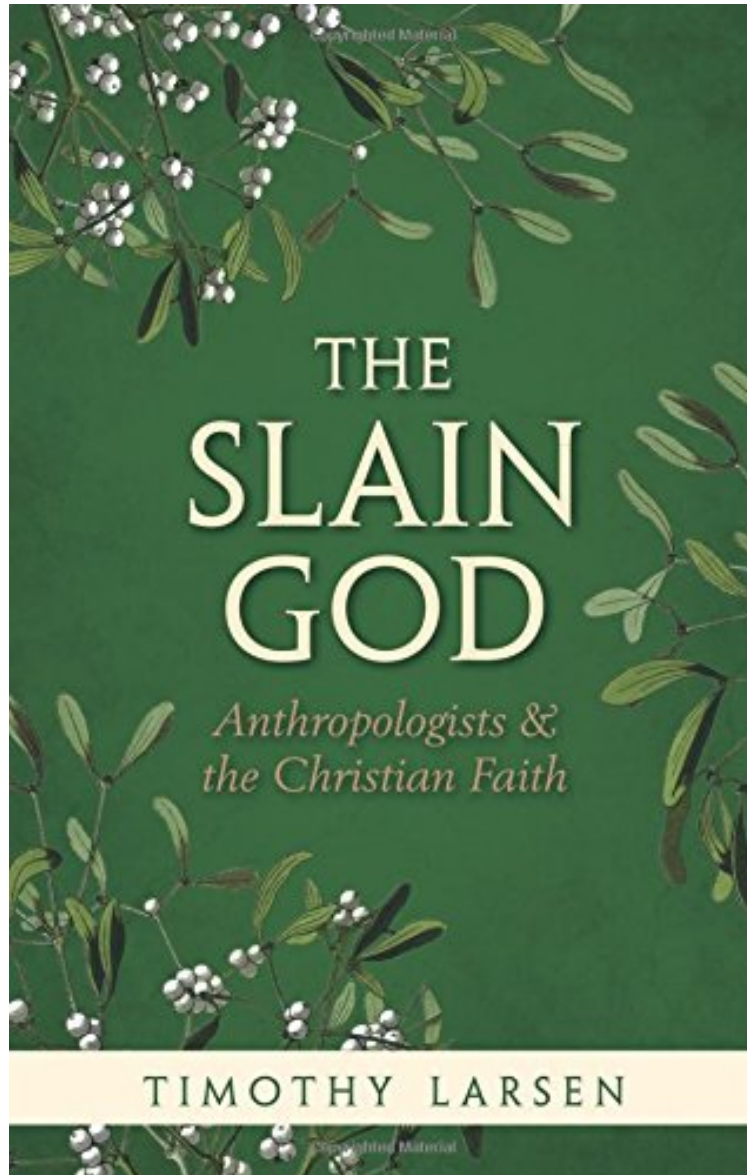


(Free) The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith

## The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith

*Timothy Larsen*

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**Timothy Larsen : The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR By David George Moore Moore: This is a rather unusual area of study. What led you to write an entire book on it? Larsen: My whole scholarly life I have been interested in the collision between modern thought and historic, orthodox, Christian beliefs.

A lot of these tensions have been explored over and over and over again by scholars: Christianity and Darwinism, Christianity and Marxism, Christianity and Freudian theories, Christianity and modern biblical criticism, and so on and on. When I read the letters and self-reflections of people in the second half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, however, what I noticed repeatedly was them mentioning the writings of anthropologists as unsettling to faith. This was a major theme in the primary sources, in the historical record. What had anthropologists discovered or theorized that seemed incompatible with Christian thought? I wondered. When I tried to find a written explanation for this, I instead learned that no scholar had made a sustained attempt to try to map this terrain as of yet, so I decided I would have a go at it myself.

Moore: When does the discipline of anthropology as we think of it today begin?

Larsen: In the second half of the nineteenth century. E. B. Tylor, who is often considered the founder of the discipline, published an early seminal work, *Primitive Culture*, in 1871, and was appointed to the first university position in anthropology (at the University of Oxford) in 1884. Franz Boaz, who is considered the founder of the discipline in the United States, received his first university appointment in 1899 (at Columbia University). During the World War I era, Bronislaw Malinowski pioneered the expectation of intensive fieldwork.

Moore: You write that Edward Tylor could not find a way to think anthropologically and as a Christian at the same time. Why is that? What would you have told him if you had the chance?

Larsen: He was in the grip of a pretty smug, self-flattering, stadial way of thinking with the three stages of human development being: savages, then barbarians, and then civilized people. He thought because primitive peoples were religious this somehow discredited faith as incompatible with being modern and civilized and scientific and so on. I wish I could have explained to him that there is a lot more continuity in the human condition over time than he ever imagined that so-called savage people were actually quite logical, scientific, and rational in ways he could not see, and that so-called modern people have other needs and thoughts and experiences and insights that do not fit into his procrustean assumptions about what it means to be a rationalistic, scientific, modern person.

Moore: The Christians at the college in Didsbury had a wonderful confidence that made them more than willing to engage skeptics like James George Frazer. How common was that among the Christian population during the late nineteenth century?

Larsen: What a great question! This is one of the major misconceptions of evangelical and orthodox Christians in the nineteenth century that they were somehow fearful of modern ideas and rejecting scientific and theoretical advances, that they were hostile and obscurantist. Some of that stereotype is just erroneous secularist propaganda and urban legends that have been transmuted into the public consciousness as fact. For example, you can read in major, premier, authoritative venues (a recent book by Yale University Press, for example, and articles in papers of record such as the *New York Times*) that Christians in the nineteenth century opposed the introduction of anesthetics for women in childbirth because Genesis supposedly dictates that this experience must be painful. Yet this is a completely false urban legend. I defy anyone to find a single sermon by any minister of any denomination anywhere saying any such thing, let alone an article in a Christian magazine or other publication, let alone an official pronouncement by a denomination. There are many examples of this kind of thing. Some of this misunderstanding comes from back-dating things that happened in the Fundamentalist movement beginning in the 1920s (which did have anti-intellectual, fearful, and obscurantist elements to it). Late Victorian Christianity was actually quite open to and welcoming of new knowledge and scientific theories even ones that were surprising given traditional Christian assumptions and very confident that faith and science would cohere together in one, integrated worldview.

Moore: Mary Douglas is an utterly fascinating person. She was shrewd in the best sense of that word. Unpack her observation that Debates which originate in quite mundane issues tend to become religious if they go on long enough.

Larsen: Yes, yes, I feel like I have been inspired to become a better, braver scholar by reading about her life and work. She was so comfortable in her own skin as a leading intellectual who was also a conservative Christian! That particular quote has been picked up on by several anthropologists since I wrote the book and it haunts me as well. What she means is that people who imagine that theology can be set aside, marginalized, or ignored in modern academic discussions are actually the ones being intellectually nave. What intellectuals really care about are issues which go to the heart of the question of the nature of reality, of meaning, of ethics, of values and these are all debates that are inherently bound up with theological content and reflections. Whenever you discuss anything (Is it important to recycle plastics? let's say, Or should I buy this new suit of clothes that I want?), the more you discuss it without coming to a quick conclusion, the two sides of the question inevitably lead you back to a more fundamental value or sense of meaning or conviction or principle or proposition and this is heading you into the territory of religion.

Moore: What has been the response to your book from those within the academic world of anthropology?

Larsen: I am unbelievably, joyfully, relieved to say that it has been received very well. I say this because for at least a couple years while I was researching it I felt like an incompetent interloper, if not a complete fraud. I have never even taken an Anthropology 101 course! I had to learn the whole discipline from scratch just by reading, and reading, and reading. I was quite ready to be rebuked by professional anthropologists for not understanding the key theories in the discipline correctly and just not getting it. Instead, the contemporary anthropologists that I most admired, not least the ones who do not self-identify as Christians including Tanya Luhmann at Stanford University and Joel Robbins at Cambridge University, as well as the former Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Jonathan Benthall (in the *Times Literary Supplement*! I would count it a triumph to have my work abused in the *TLS*) have received it so wonderfully warmly and appreciatively. There was

a whole panel on the book at the annual meeting the American Anthropological Association, and I have been invited to speak on it at the major anthropology seminar at Oxford, at the London School of Economics (the very storied seminar that Malinowski founded), at Cambridge, at Northwestern University, and so on. It feels like dumb luck that I wrote this book at a time when the Anthropology of Christianity has suddenly become a hot subfield in the discipline. I am very, very grateful for how anthropologists have welcomed and received my work. Moore: What kind of non-academic would profit from reading your book? Larsen: Another surprisingly wonderful question. These things are a matter of taste, so I am willing to accept humbly if others see it differently, but I see myself as a narrative historian who works very hard to have a literary quality in my work akin to an author of fiction. Just like a short story writer uses a lot of details in description to build up a vivid, compelling portrait of an imagined character, so I have tried to do that with these historical characters. In other words, I think the lives I present in the book do work for the ordinary, intellectually curious reader who cares about the human condition and experience as lived up-close and in-detail. Buy it for your grandmother for Christmas! 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Great book on time By Mike E. As expected!

Named Book of the Year by Books and Culture Throughout its entire history, the discipline of anthropology has been perceived as undermining, or even discrediting, Christian faith. Many of its most prominent theorists have been agnostics who assumed that ethnographic findings and theories had discredited religious beliefs. E. B. Tylor, the founder of the discipline in Britain, lost his faith through studying anthropology. James Frazer saw the material that he presented in his highly influential work, *The Golden Bough*, as demonstrating that Christian thought was based on the erroneous thought patterns of "savages." On the other hand, some of the most eminent anthropologists have been Christians, including E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and Edith Turner. Moreover, they openly presented articulate reasons for how their religious convictions cohered with their professional work. Despite being a major site of friction between faith and modern thought, the relationship between anthropology and Christianity has never before been the subject of a book-length study. In this groundbreaking work, Timothy Larsen examines the point where doubt and faith collide with anthropological theory and evidence.

"Larsen provides a most satisfying study... Beautifully written and carrying lightly an immense amount of historical and literary research well placed in the extensive footnotes to each chapter, one is impressed with the fullness of Larsen's explorations... By bringing so many strands together in a remarkably complete documentation of all sources, Larsen's work stands as difficult to refute by those intoxicated with the fable that anthropology is of its nature secular, that all religion is illogical and beyond analytical remit, save to destroy it and that faith is incompatible with the good works of the discipline."--New Blackfriars "What [Larsen] has done in *The Slain God* is commendable in its scope and depth, well executed in its writing, and rich in insight. It will reward careful study by students of anthropology, cultural theory, contemporary theology, and modern religious history."--The Journal of Religion "Sophisticated wit and graceful prose. Highly recommended to advanced general readers as well as to specialists."--Church History "This well-documented and well-written book is an interesting account of the lives and works of some of the most influential anthropologists and their own Christian faith, or lack thereof.... This is a welcome contribution to the history of anthropology, and to the growing body of literature that reflects on Christianity's influence on shaping the discipline, and on the complex, often difficult, relationship between the two. This book is relevant to researchers and students alike, who have a general interest in anthropology, and a particular interest in the study of Christianity from an anthropological perspective.... Larsen's narrative and sharp observations skilfully weave together authors' biographical experiences with their theoretical and ethnographic findings... I hope this book will break for good certain unspoken taboos in the discipline that one cannot be at the same time a serious anthropologist and a practising 'believer'."--Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute "This is a startling book. Many anthropologists do not realize how deeply religious many of the great anthropologists of religion have been. *The Slain God* raises the question of how faith shapes what the anthropologist sees, and it will change the way the reader thinks about the answer.."--Tanya Luhrmann, Watkins University Professor of Anthropology, Stanford University "Larsen's book is beautifully written and based on the most patient scrutiny of every scrap of evidence. It provides an authoritative account of some of anthropology's most influential practitioners."--David Martin, Professor of Sociology Emeritus, London School of Economics "This well-written and finely research book . . . should be widely discussed in a variety of circles concerned with anthropology, religious studies, theology and the history of religion."--Journal of Ecclesiastical History "Larsen shines a bright sidelight on the history of social anthropology and its treatment of Christianity." --Times Literary Supplement "In his latest book, *The Slain God*, Timothy Larsen provides a compelling account of the complex relationship between anthropology and the Christian faith . . . His is the first book-length study of the relationship between anthropology and Christianity and as such is of interest to anyone who wishes to understand this relationship better. The book is also particularly timely in view of the recent resurgence of interest in these issues in the anthropology of Christianity."--Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford "As in his earlier work, Larsen disrupts a teleological vision of religion condemned to disappear before the forces of progress and modernity. He is to

be congratulated for challenging this narrative head-on and confronting what amounts to anti-religious bias in the human sciences." --Journal of Theological Studies "One of the many virtues of Larsen's study is its revealing of the 'all too human' character of the scholarship by the anthropologists he examines." --Christian Smith, First Things "Witty, penetrating, following the evidence where it leads, this book is a great delight." --Books and Culture "Larsen's book is clearly and delightfully written. It is, he says, the first book-length study of the subject, and it is as welcome as it is overdue." --Peter J. Leithart "Readers interested in continuing debates over faith, science and secularism will find much of value in this very important book. The further you get into the book, the more astonished you are that no predecessor has written such a full-length study of this critically important topic." --Philip Jenkins, author of The Next Christendom "Witty, penetrating, following the evidence where it leads, this book is a great delight." --Books Culture "Larsen deals with historical research on the religiosity of six 19th- and 20th-century British social anthropologists (Edward Burnett Tylor, James George Frazer, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mary Trew Douglas, Victor Witter Turner, and Edith Lucy Brocklesby Davis Turner), how they interfaced with Christianity, and how their research (much of it in sub-Saharan Africa) led some to see social science as compatible with faith and others to discredit faith... The research is supported by abundant footnotes, 17 pages of bibliography, and 8 pages of index. This book will be of most utility to those interested in British social anthropology and the trajectory of these individuals." --HOICE "This book will be greeted as something of a bombshell amongst anthropologists of religion. . . . a highly original book that should be with us for a long time to come." --Joel Robbins, Sigrid Rausing Professor of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University "Larsen has broken new ground in an area that was overgrown with the weeds of anecdote and myth." --International Bulletin Missionary Research "Larsen's volume is impressive in its depth and scope. This informative study will be a resource for students and academics . . . Larsen's book is a groundbreaking and meticulously developed project that demonstrates the relevance of personal faith and religious experience within anthropology research and discourse." --Theological Studies

About the Author Timothy Larsen is McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. He is a Fellow of both the Royal Historical Society and the Royal Anthropological Institute. He has been a Visiting Fellow, Trinity College, Cambridge, and some of the research for this volume was undertaken while a Visiting Fellow, All Souls College, Oxford. His previous monographs published by Oxford University Press are *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* and *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*.