

# Franz Boas: Religion and Theory

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 69:741-744, 1967]

MORRIS E. OPLER  
*Cornell University*

Sir:

Not long ago a short monograph published by Rice University (White 1966) was sent to me unsolicited. The envelope label indicated that I was so honored because the mailing list of the Fellows of the American Anthropological Association was used, and I therefore assume that a large section of the readership of the *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST* has also received the study and that this is the audience which was deliberately sought. Much of this monograph is a characterization of the personality and work of Franz Boas. In this context Boas' "religion" receives some attention, and after a passage on this subject the author parries possible criticism for introducing the topic by observing in a note: "I have discovered upon more than one occasion that merely to mention that a scholar is a Jew is to expose one's self to the suspicion – or accusation – of anti-Semitism" (1966:55). This statement turns out to be inspired by a comment of Dr. Charles S. Brant (1964:63) in a review of one of Dr. White's works. Since the dictionary definition of "to mention" is "to call attention to someone or something in an incidental or casual manner," we are led by Dr. White's language to believe that Dr. Brant criticized him simply because he mentioned that Boas was a Jew.

Few of us would insist that a scholar's religious convictions and affiliations are never helpful in understanding his views. It should not be too much to ask, however, that references to a person's religion be accurate and be shown to be pertinent. What, then, were Boas' religious beliefs and ties? In discussing this, Boas' interest in and connections with the New York Society for Ethical Culture, a non-creedal, humanist religion, must be taken into consideration. Jerome Nathanson, a member of the present Board of Leaders, in a letter of December 29, 1966, wrote me: "Henry Neumann, a Leader in our movement for many decades who died only recently in his 85th year, always insisted that Boas was a member." In a communication dated January 24, 1967, Mr. Nathanson adds: "Forgive the delay in coming back at you again with respect to Franz Boas and his relation to Ethical Culture. I have checked with Horace Friess [another member of the

present Board of Leaders of the Society – M.E.O.] about this, since his wife, Ruth, is one of Felix Adler's daughters [Adler was the founder and Senior Leader of the Society – M.E.O.]. She, too, (as was the case with Dr. Neumann) is sure that he was a Member of the Society; for how long a period she evidently has no recollection, but that our position expresses what was his religious attitude seems very definite." Felix Adler and his older brother, incidentally, were two of the 38 subscribers who underwrote the Boas Anniversary Volume of 1906.

Other evidence along the same line is that Ernst Boas, the son of Franz Boas, graduated from a school which is associated with the Society (the Fieldston School, known at the time as the Ethical Culture School) and cooperated with leaders of the Society in civic matters in later years. Through Mr. Nathanson's kindness I have been given copies of letters and documents which indicate Boas' participation in Society programs and contact with its leaders over a period of 30 years. The last of these letters, dated September 29, 1941, is addressed to Dr. John Elliott, Senior Leader of the Society, and asks him to see a young man who has a problem. Information of this kind suggests that Boas had limited interest in formal or creedal Judaism, and challenges Dr. White's identification of Boas as a Jew, unless, of course, Dr. White uses the word in other than a religious sense.

Since the issue of the bearing of his religion upon his scientific work is being considered, it is interesting to see what Boas himself had to say about the inappropriate importation of religious matters into the scientific domain. I introduce a portion of a letter which Boas wrote to the editor of *The Nation* because, though it is important and revealing, I have not found reference to it in bibliographies of Boas' writings. I trust it will not go unnoticed that Boas' generous effort was on behalf of E. B. Tylor, who by this time had been preaching classical evolutionism for over 30 years, and that Boas gives cordial recognition to a number of anthropologists and centers of anthropological work, something that Leslie White has recently denied he ever did (1966: 27).

Sir: Anthropology has become one of the acknowledged branches of university studies in America. It is many years since Sir Daniel Wilson introduced the study of it in the University of Toronto. The University of Pennsylvania has long had an anthropological department in charge of Prof. Daniel G. Brinton. At the time of the foundation of Clark University in Worcester the department of Anthropology was established as one of the subdivisions of the department of Psychology. At Harvard, anthropological instruction has been given for a long time by Prof. F. W. Putnam, and a separate department was founded in 1892. At the same time an anthropological department was introduced at the University of Chicago as one of the subdivisions of the department of Political Science. During the last two years the University of California has established an anthropological department, and Columbia College of New York has included courses of lectures on this subject in its curriculum. In all these universities the science of Anthropology is taught successfully. To these institutions may be added numerous universities of Europe in which Anthropology is taught: first of all Paris, with its École d'Anthropologie; then Rome, Munich, Leipzig, Berlin – to mention the most important schools only.

Notwithstanding these facts, the University of Oxford in Convocation declined the proposed establishment of an anthropological department, on the alleged ground that this science is not capable of being taught! As a matter of fact, Anthropology as a branch of university education was recognized at Oxford in 1883 by the appointment of the eminent scholar Dr. E. B. Tylor, as a University Reader....

As a matter of fact, the opposition to the measure was founded on the deep-seated theological aversion to the scientific study of man. A great many curates were brought in to vote against it, and I am assured that by this means the vote of 68 against 60 by which the proposition was lost was secured. Thus England is still without an adequate representation of Anthropology in its universities, and Oxford has missed the chance to be the first to take this step, which must be taken, sooner or later, if English universities desire to keep in the ranks with the advance of science. To us the theological opposition is a reminder of by-gone times when the results of the study of the manners, customs, and beliefs of man were ill understood. The aims of Anthropology are better appreciated in America, and many are the theologians whose contributions to the advance of this science we should be loath to miss [Boas 1895].

Boas' concern over any religious tests for Tylor and anthropology is mirrored in still other evidence. Wilson D. Wallis wrote: "Boas told me that he was staying with Tylor the night before the University Convocation was to pass on the matter of Tylor's Professorship, and it was anticipated that the clergy would attend en masse to voice their strong opposition to it" (1957: 781).

I now turn to the second question, whether Dr. White merely "mentioned" that Franz Boas was Jewish. For 12 pages in the article to which Dr. Brant reacted, Dr. White ridiculed and

deplored the doctrine of individualism in human affairs. He painted the blackest possible consequences of the notion that human beings are effective in the culture process and expanded at length on the crippling effects to the discipline of such a view. Throughout these pages he offers no explanation of how and why such mischievous doctrine came to prevail in anthropology. Then, on the 13th page, after all this negativism and foreboding, comes Dr. White's explanation, and it is the only one he presents:

Franz Boas was "of Jewish extraction." The exasperating phenomenon of anti-Semitism was of much concern to Boas not only in his formative years, as Kluckhohn and Prufer have pointed out, but throughout his entire life. Many of his most prominent students were Jewish, also.\* [John Sholtz, writing in *Reflex: a Jewish Magazine* (6, 1935) comments upon "the disproportionate position held by Jewish scientists" in the field of anthropology in the U. S.] As members of a minority group, many anthropologists of the Boas school were much concerned with the question of racial conflicts.... In his discussion of race Boas exalts the individual and minimizes the significance of race.... Boas made a desperate effort to subordinate race to the individual [1963:123-124].

It was the injection of John Sholtz and his comment into the discussion that made it difficult for Dr. Brant to render a "charitable interpretation." Dr. White is indignant over this cavalier treatment of his "authority" and responds:

John Sholtz may himself be Jewish. He was writing in "a Jewish Magazine." He said nothing derogatory about the role of Jews in American anthropology. Quite the contrary: he found them "easily the leaders in the field." It is not clear to me why anyone, regardless of his religious faith or ethnic background, should take offense to Sholtz' statement or to my use of it [1966:55].

Now who is this John Sholtz who is invoked and so warmly defended by Dr. White? If Dr. White had persisted in his research, he would have encountered an editorial note on contributors which reads: "John Sholtz is the academic secretary of the Jewish Academic Society of Southern California. He is engaged in anthropological studies and is a resident of Los Angeles, California." After consulting the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *International Index to Periodicals*, the *Cumulative Book Index*, *Who's Who*, *Who Was Who*, American Anthropological Association membership lists, etc., etc., I can say that if John Sholtz completed his "anthropological studies"

or published in any other outlet besides *The Reflex*, I have found no evidence of it. I have located two articles which Sholtz contributed to *The Reflex*: the one from which Dr. White quoted and another three-page tour de force on religion printed in the succeeding and final volume of the magazine.

It may surprise some to learn that the piece by Sholtz from which White quotes is not primarily about Boas or his Jewish colleagues in American anthropology. Two sentences only are devoted to that topic. They are the two quoted by Dr. White in his monograph, namely: "In the one field of anthropology alone, it is interesting to note the disproportionate position held by Jewish scientists in this country. Men like Boaz [*sic*], Golden weiser [*sic*], Lowie, Radin are easily the leaders in the field" (Sholtz 1935:9). If Sholtz's spelling did not eliminate him as an authority, one would have thought his obvious ignorance of American anthropology would have done so. To whom is it so apparent that Goldenweiser, Lowie, and Radin were "easily" the leaders in a field which at the time included Kroeber, Wissler, Linton, Benedict, Redfield, Parsons, Swanton, Kidder, and many others? Moreover, Sholtz has been quoted out of context, for he is severe with Jewish leaders and scholars. He thinks they have avoided "sociological theory" because "the Jewish mentality tends to avoid mere speculation and turns to more definite problems – those more technical and more susceptible of practical application" (1935:9). Anthropology is one of those practical fields (it would be interesting to know how Sholtz arrived at his conception of anthropology), and this, in his opinion, is why Jews have entered anthropology in "disproportionate" numbers. Still, the glut in one direction is matched by poverty in another. "But I do not know of any outstanding general sociologist in this country who is a Jew," he complains; "Durkheim, a French Jew, is the one major figure in this field" (1935:9). This article is about Durkheim and is written in praise of Durkheim. The title is "Durkheim's Theory of Culture." Durkheim is its hero, the Moses who can lead Jewish scientists out of a crowded anthropology to a purer theoretical realm – the model who, not without difficulties, overcame the tendencies of the "Jewish mentality." Dr. White does not see why anyone should take offense at his use of Sholtz. I do not see how Dr. Brant or anyone else could fail to take offense at the use by a recognized scholar, on an important and sensitive

issue, of the empty verbalism of a person of no standing in the field.

On page 16 of the monograph we find this double-barreled sentence: "Boas, who was 'of Jewish extraction' (Lowie, 1947, p. 310), had been intensely concerned with anti-Semitism since his 'formative years' (Kluckhohn and Prufer, 1959, p. 10)" (White 1966). The normal assumption is that the two citations have some relation to each other and that Lowie is providing confirmation of the assertion of the other two writers. Actually Lowie is not talking about Boas' religion as such or of his youth in this passage. He is describing the terrors and sorrows of his old age. After telling of Boas' indignation at the rise of Hitler, Lowie writes: "Besides, being of Jewish extraction, he had relatives in Germany whose very existence was threatened by the *Umbruch*." As for the second half of Dr. White's statement and what follows, there is a strong implication that Boas' researches on race and minorities were a self-serving mechanism and little more than a reaction to anti-Semitism. No one acquainted with the difficulties to which Boas exposed himself during World War I as a result of his antiwar stand will doubt his devotion to principle regardless of personal consequences. It is sheer cynicism to hint that it is only the victims of anti-Semitism or racism who reject them. Kluckhohn and Prufer couple their remarks about the young Boas' concern over anti-Semitism with a reference to Virchow's "stalwart opposition to all forms of anti-Semitism." Why did the "safe" Virchow fight anti-Semitism? Dr. White might read an article by Carl Vogt (1881), the German naturalist, for a grim picture and denunciation of the anti-Semitism within Germany during Boas' youth. Why was Vogt exercised? A good many people believe that the real hero of the Dreyfus case was the "gentile," Zola.

Despite Dr. Brant's mild rebuke over the tone of the references to Boas' "religion" in the 1963 article on individualism, Dr. White unrepentantly introduces the same material and the same "authority" in the Rice University monograph and adds an even more disturbing note. He says:

Let us have another look at the Boas school, the small, compact group of scholars that were gathered about the leader. The earliest were principally foreign-born or the children of immigrants. Goldenweiser was born in Kiev; Radin in Lodz; Lowie in Vienna, and Sapir in Pomerania. Kroeber's father was born in Cologne, and his mother was American-born, of German antecedents. All were fluent in the German language. Like Boas, most were of Jewish ancestry.

John Sholtz, writing in *Reflex: a Jewish Magazine* (Vol. 6, p. 9, 1935) has observed that “in the one field of anthropology alone, it is interesting to note the disproportionate position held by Jewish scientists in this country. Men like Boaz [*sic*], Golden weiser [*sic*], Lowie, Radin are easily the leaders in the field.”

A school by definition tends to be a closed society or group. Kroeber tells of how George A. Dorsey, an American-born gentile and a Ph.D. from Harvard, tried to gain admittance to the select group but failed:....

Clark Wissler, also an American-born gentile, was a student of Boas in the formative years of the “school,” but “broke personally with him about 1906” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 151).... Oral tradition in American anthropology has it that a clash of personalities and temperaments between Boas and Linton caused the latter to leave Columbia and go to Harvard [1966:26-27].

Is Dr. White trying to tell us that a clique of foreign-oriented characters sat around speaking German to shut others out of the conversation? I have seen Lowie in the company of Kroeber, Kroeber in the company of Sapir, and Radin in the company of both, and on all occasions these old Teutons spoke very acceptable English prose. In fact, I have known some of the persons he names rather well, and I have never heard any of them speak to anyone in German.

Whatever tongue Boas’ students used, they never spoke with one voice. Sapir (1917) warned against Kroeber’s fascination with the superorganic. Radin collected autobiography (1920), while Kroeber likened individuals to stones in a gravel bed (1919: 261). Radin dealt roughly with Boas’ theoretical work (1929: 16), and Kroeber (1935) and Boas (1936) argued about historical method. It would not be difficult to demonstrate that there is less uniformity of outlook among Boas, Benedict, Goldenweiser, Kroeber, Lowie, Radin, and Sapir than among White, Robert Anderson, Buettner-Janusch, Carneiro, Dole, Evans, James Ford, Meggers, Newcomb, Norbeck, Sahlins, and Service.

It was a novel experience to receive from a reputable university material in which scientists who are “American-born gentiles” are distinguished from those who are not. “George A. Dorsey, an American-born gentile” and, to make things even more suspicious, “a Ph.D. from Harvard,” felt that he was not admitted to the intimate circle around Boas. The choice of language implies that he was excluded because he was not Jewish and/or foreign. Yet neither Dorsey, who made the complaint, nor Kroeber, who recorded it, suggests that religion or national origin was involved. It might be noted that in passing along his remark, Kroeber describes Dorsey’s “energy, self-reliance,

competitiveness, and hard-boiled man-of-business manner” – a word picture that suggests reasons other than religion why he didn’t become Boas’ intimate. Actually, Lowie, too, in spite of his “Jewish extraction” and German language competence, felt that Boas took little notice of him during his student days and that such “gentiles” as Kroeber, William Jones, Tozzer, and Benedict established a much closer relationship with Boas than he was able to achieve (Lowie 1956a: 159). If religion and European roots were so important, Dr. White will have to explain to us why his friend and colleague at the University of Buffalo, Nathaniel Cantor, not along so badly with Boas and why Ruth Benedict managed so well, or why the “gentile” Cattell and Boas “remained life-long friends” (Kroeber 1956: 154).

Dr. White would have us believe that differences of religion and national origin were responsible for the cooling of relations between Wissler and Boas. I offer the opinion that, even if one had been a Buddhist and the other a Parsi, they would have drifted apart. It was Wissler’s increasing enchantment with biological determinism, eugenics, and the glorification of the Nordic that made the break inevitable. According to his son, Boas maintained a life-long and very warm friendship with P. E. Goddard, another American “gentile” whom he came to know during the same period when his relations with Wissler were deteriorating. Dr. White dips into “oral tradition” for the intelligence that Boas and Linton did not get along too well. I have heard this, too, but never that it was due to religion or nationality. I would be interested to know, on the basis of “oral tradition,” whether Linton had any more friction with Boas than he did with Radcliffe-Brown, Fay-Cooper Cole, or Ruth Benedict. A number of us still around could give personal testimony on this score. We might also like to know, if religion is involved, why Boas got along so much better with Quaker Goddard than with Quaker Linton. As an antidote to the skewed picture of the Jew Boas and his Jewish students isolating themselves and muttering to one another in German as they hatched their plot to subvert anthropology, it might be refreshing to read Lowie’s account of what they really did, of their contacts outside of anthropology with such “gentile” teachers as Dewey and Cattell, and of their interests in the views of Pearson, Mach, Ostwald, Poincaré, and William James (Lowie 1956b: 1012).

The last piece of “evidence” introduced to prove Boas’ foreign and anti-American leanings is a letter from Theobald Fischer to a relative of Boas, expressing uncomplimentary sentiments toward the United States and urging that Boas remain in Germany for his professional career. The objections to using this letter as a guide to Boas’ position are that Boas didn’t write it, it was not addressed to him, there is no evidence that he ever saw it or was influenced by it, and (since he did leave Germany and come to the United States for his career) he obviously viewed matters in a different light.

It should be clear by now that any suspicions about anti-Semitism which arose in the mind of Dr. Brant were not occasioned by a mere “mention” of Boas’ religion. The classic pattern of anti-Semitic propaganda is to arouse anxiety or indignation about a situation, to blame it entirely on the Jews, and to support this contention with shaky facts and spurious authorities. It is to be hoped that Dr. White blundered into this pattern through a set of remarkable coincidences which are not likely to be repeated.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- BOAS, FRANZ  
 1895 Letter to the editor: Anthropology at the University of Oxford. *The Nation*, July 11, 1927.  
 1936 History and science in anthropology: a reply. *American Anthropologist* 38:137-141.
- BRANT, CHARLES S.  
 1964 Review: The ethnography and ethnology of Franz Boas, by Leslie A. White. *Man* 74:63.
- KLUCKHOHN, CLYDE, AND OLAF PRUFER  
 1959 Influences during the formative years. In: *The Anthropology of Franz Boas*. Walter Goldschmidt, ed. American Anthropological Association Memoir No.89. Pp. 4-28.
- KROEBER, A. L.  
 1919 On the principle of order in civilization as exemplified by changes of fashion. *American Anthropologist* 21: 235-263.  
 1935 History and science in anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 37 :39-69.  
 1956 The place of Boas in anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 58:151-159.
- LOWIE, ROBERT H.  
 1947 Franz Boas, 1858-1942. In *National Academy of Sciences, Biographical Memoir*, XXIV, No.9, pp. 303-320. Reprinted in Lowie’s selected papers in anthropology. Cora Du Bois, ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1960. Pp. 425-440.  
 1956a Boas once more. *American Anthropologist* 58: 159-163.  
 1956b Reminiscences of anthropological currents in America half a century ago. *American Anthropologist* 58:995-1016.
- RADIN, PAUL  
 1920 The autobiography of a Winnebago Indian. In *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. XVI, No. 7, pp. 381-473. Berkeley, University of California Press.  
 1929 History of ethnological theories. *American Anthropologist* 31:9-33.
- SAPIR, EDWARD  
 1917 Do we need a “superorganic”? *American Anthropologist* 19:441-447.
- SHOLTZ, JOHN  
 1935 Durkheim’s theory of culture. *The Reflex* VI:2:9-12.  
 1936 The role of religion. *The Reflex* VII:4:12-14.
- VOGT, CARL  
 1881 Lingering barbarism. *Popular Science Monthly* XVIII: 638-643 (March).
- WALLIS, WILSON D.  
 1957 Anthropology in England early in the present century. *American Anthropologist* 59:781-790.
- WHITE, LESLIE A.  
 1963 Individuality and individualism: a culturological interpretation. *Texas Quarterly* VI:2: 111-127.  
 1966 The social organization of ethnological theory. Monograph in cultural anthropology. *Rice University Studies* 52:4:1-66.

# On Opler On White On Boas: More Tradition

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 70:965, 1968]

CLIFTON AMSBURY

*Richmond, California*

Sir:

Apropos of Morris Opler's (1967) analysis of Leslie White's references to the significance of Franz Boas' "Jewish extraction," perhaps I may be permitted to dip also into "the oral tradition" as a hint to other historians of anthropological back closets.

The only other reference I had heard of the "Jewish school of anthropology" was from a student of Ralph Linton's, Earl Bell, under whom I served as graduate assistant in 1932/33. The context of Dr. Bell's remarks implied that there are other directions in which to look. I gathered that the question of "extraction" is less pertinent to an investigation of the course of anthropology at Columbia University and the University of California than it would be to a study of the recruitment and formative years of the Peabody Museum's anthropological personnel.

Two observations of my own might be relevant: The idea of Boas as the founder of a tradition of the anthropology of the individual hardly squares with the judgment of Boas given by Paul Radin (see for instance 1933 [1967]: 60) and also the idea of an anthropology of the impotency and insignificance of the individual hardly squares with the actual careers of A. L. Kroeber, G. P. Murdock, or L. A. White.

## REFERENCES CITED

OPLER, MORRIS E.

1967 Franz Boas: religion and theory. *American Anthropologist* 69:741-745.

RADIN, PAUL

1933 The method and theory of ethnology: an essay in criticism. New York and London, McGraw-Hill Book Company. [Reprinted 1967: New York/London, Basic Books.]