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# The evolution of Religion

## Anthro perspectives

→ complex phenomenon, intrigued anth, historians & scholars for eons.

### Animism & the beginnings of religious thought

At the foundation of rel evolution lies animism → earliest form of spirituality often considered.

E.B. Tylor, prominent 19th c anthropologist, introduced animism in his work "Primitive Culture" (1871)

Animism > "Belief that nature is animated (enlived) by distinct personalized spirit beings seperable from body"

spirits (souls & ghosts/ghosts) dwell in humans, animals, human made artifacts & in the woods

may be malevolent, benevolent or neutral

concept typical of those who see themselves as part of nature rather



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most food foragers

than superior to it

Food producing ppl  
who see little qualitative  
diff b/w human & any  
other living entity

role of God/godess only  
as to create a world fit to  
live in

• spirits ↑ imp, the ones who help/hinder  
the shaman/huntsman.

vital to understand cognitive evolution  
of religious thought. → human inclination  
to find patterns & meanings in a  
complex & unpredictable world.

## Magic & Rituals

James Frazer's work "The Golden Bough" 1890 delves into role of magic & rituals in progression of religious beliefs

Frazer argues that magic & ritual practices are integral to the evolution of religion through by facilitating a sense of control over enviro & events.

→ He introduced concept → "sympathetic magic" — which posited magical actions performed on symbolic objects will have effect on real life phenomena

Finally  
Bingo!

purpose > harness natural forces through magic & manipulation

Rituals, a commonly used in religious practices > bridge b/w physical & spiritual realms

Engaging in certain ceremonies, humans tend to influence course of action / certain events from fertility to hunting processes.

Frazer's work emphasizes psychological comfort derived from rituals > way to navigate uncertainties of life

lead to continuation of rel practices within communities

## Totemism & Social Integration

Emile Durkheim's exploration of religious phenomena "The elementary forms of Religious Life" #1912 introduced concept of Totemism

immense significance in evolution of religious practices & social cohesion

Durkheim → Totemism arose as a

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result for need of integration b/w the early human communities

Totemic symbols

animals

natural elements

became emblems of clans & groups

foster a sense of belonging & identity

Totemism played vital role in maintenance of social order & solidarity

Rituals & ceremonies related to totemistic symbols reinforced group identity & collective consciousness

Def

Totemism is cultural belief → human groups have mystical rel w natural objects. The obj with which group is associated is called a totem

grp most often is a unilinear kin grp like such as 'clan'.

Totem often serves name of group

e.g. eagle clan, bear clan etc.

Aboriginal ppl of Australia

treat totem like a clan mate.

gave birth to their ancestors in mythical period

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This perspective emphasizes the intertwining of rel beliefs & communal ties in early stages of rel evolution.

## Theories of structural functionalism

Malinowski → key figure in dev of str. func, provided insights into how rel beliefs & practices served practical functions within societies

In his work, "Magic, Science & Religion" (1925) → highlighted adaptive nature of religions in addressing human needs & anxieties  
says Magic & Religion offered explanation of natural events, ensuring a sense of control over the env.

Mal's perspective on functionalism in religion underscores role of belief systems in maintaining psychological equilibrium  
perspective emphasized "shared" coping mechanisms within groups

## Transition to Polytheism & Monotheism

Sigmund Freud's "The Future of an Illusion" (1927) **Bingo!**

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introduced a psychological perspective on transition from animism to a more complex religious system like polytheism & monotheism

Freud argued that rel beliefs and gods were projections of human desires, fears and unresolved conflicts.

The transition from animism to polytheism & monotheism presented a progression in how these projections were externalised and personified.

Freud's theory emphasizes role of religion → mechanism to address existential crisis, anxieties and desires.

Polytheism → array of deities → reflects diversity of human concerns.

Monotheism → single, all powerful deity → attempt to simplify + centralise these concerns.

Freud's perspective adds a layer to depth to discussion of rel. evolution → interplay b/w psychology & development -

Finally  
BingO!

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## Evolutionary perspectives on religion

Study of rel & supernatural from an evolutionary perspective offers insights into origins, functions, & adaptations of these culture phenomena.

Foundational work on evolution perspective → Charles Darwin's "On the origin of species" (1859) while not directly addressing religion, his work laid groundwork for understanding natural selection & adaptation → which later contributed to study of rel beliefs

James Frazer → Golden Bough / 1890  
details in previous pages.

Ernst Durkheim → "The Elementary forms of religious life (1912)"  
details in previous pages.

Freud → "The Future of an Illusion" 1927  
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## Pascal Boyer

his work "Religion Explained" 2001 combines cognitive science & evolutionary theory to explain the origins of religious beliefs.

He suggests human cognitive mechanisms such as agency detection and theory of mind make humans naturally inclined to attribute events to intentional agents, including supernatural ones.

↳ this tendency leads to development of rel beliefs

## David Sloan Wilson

"Darwin's Cathedral" 2002

↳ offers evolutionary explanation for persistence of religion.

Religion enhances group selection > fostering cooperation within a community. Wilson's multilevel selection theory posits rel beliefs contributes to success of some grps by promoting collective identity.



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evolutionary adaptations of religion & supernatural beliefs

→ evolution has shaped human cognition to perceive patterns & agency in env > supernatural beliefs constructed to explain unpredictability

→ social cohesion

Durkheim's concept of religion as source of collective effervescence

→ emotional coping mechanism  
Freud's notion of religion as illusion, reduce anxiety

→ moral framework

evolution of primitive religion

