

Anthropology ^{Amen}

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Q All groups of people develop complexes of symbols, rituals, and beliefs that connect their own experience to the essential nature of the universe. Explain evolution and function of primitive religion as discussed by anthropologists? (2023)

Introduction :

A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e. things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them

~ Emile Durkheim

Primitive religion has been the beliefs and practices of people who lack writing and have a simple, material culture. Apparently, it has existed since the beginning of mankind. It has been the religion of man without divine guidance, trying to make his peace with the terrifying and mysterious

Powers of nature **Melford E Spiro** defined religion as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings'

1 Religio : Evolution :

As per **Mithen** Somewhere around 60,000 years ago humans evolved a capacity for symbolic communication. This allowed them to share through symbolic communication these internal models with each other. Thus, a cultural storehouse of shared knowledge developed. Many different models, all of them with adaptive possibilities, were communicated to others with symbols. The most popular of these cultural models became religions.

(i) John Lubbock:

Sir John Lubbock, also known as Lord Avebury, was a British banker, politician, and archaeologist who lived from 1834-1913. He made significant contributions to various fields, including archaeology, anthropology, and

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evolutionary studies. In his book "The Origin of civilization and the primitive condition of Man (1870)" Lubbock proposed a theory of the development of religious beliefs among early human societies. He suggested that primitive religion evolved through different stages which he referred to

1) Animism:

Lubbock argued that the earliest form of religion was animism, which is the belief that natural objects and phenomena possess spirit or souls. Early humans attributed consciousness and agency to various elements of nature such as trees, rocks, animals, and even celestial bodies. This belief system likely emerged from early humans' attempts to explain and interact with the natural world around them.

Example:

↳ As per "The Sacred Wisdom of the Native Americans" by Larry J. Zimmerman

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Many native American tribes traditionally held animistic beliefs such as Navajo, Cherokee, Hopi and Lakota Sioux.

↳ Kalash people: The last animists of Hindu (UNESCO report - 2018)

The Kalash people practice a form of Animism that involves the worship of various natural objects and spirits.

They believe that everything in the natural world has a spirit or soul, they honor and respect these spirits through their religious practices.

(b) Fetishism:

The second stage, according to Lubbock, was fetishism, primitive humans believed that certain objects, known as fetishes, possessed magical powers or embodied spirits. These fetishes were often regarded as amulets or charms that could bring protection or good fortune to their possessors. Fetishism can be seen as a development from animism as it involved the veneration

of specific objects instead of general natural elements

Example: Fon people of Benin

As per "Voodoo: Search for the Spirit" by Laennec Hurbon, Fon people of Benin historically associated with fetishism. They are known for their traditional religious practices which include the veneration of objects. These objects, often carved from wood or made from other materials, are believed to possess spiritual powers and are used in various rituals and ceremonies.

③ Anthropomorphism:

The third stage described by Lubbock, in this phase, humans began to attribute human like characteristics and personalities to natural phenomena and gods. Anthropomorphic deities were believed to have human emotions, desires, and intentions, and they often served as explanations for natural events and as symbols of cultural values and norms.

Example:

In Egyptian mythology, various gods and goddesses were depicted with human like forms and characteristics. As per

"The complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt by Wilkinson ~ 2003,

the goddess **Bastet**, who was depicted with the head of a lioness or as a woman with the head of a lioness, Bastet was associated with protection, fertility and the home.

Another example from Egyptian mythology is the god **Thoth**, often depicted with the head of an ibis bird, despite these animal features. Thoth possessed human like qualities, such as wisdom, intellect, and the ability to communicate with other gods. Thoth was the deity of wisdom, writing and magic.

ii) Edward Burnett Tylor

E. B. Tylor was a pioneering anthropologist who lived from 1832-1917.

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In his book "Primitive culture" 1871

Tylor proposed a theory of the development of primitive religious beliefs and practices among human societies. He argued that religion evolved from a simple and primitive form to a more complex and sophisticated expression over time. Tylor's theory focused on Animism, which he considered the earliest and most basic form of religion.

① Animism:

According to Tylor, the earliest form of religion was animism. Animism is the belief of in spiritual beings or souls that inhabit natural elements, animals and objects.

Early humans, in their efforts to explain the world around them, attributed consciousness and agency to various phenomena. This belief system formed the foundation of religious thought and laid the groundwork for more complex religious beliefs.

② Polytheism and Monotheism:

Tylor proposed that animism gradually

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evolved into more complex religious systems such as polytheism (belief in multiple gods) and monotheism (belief in a single all powerful deity). He argued that as societies became more complex and organized, the religious beliefs and practices also underwent transformation leading to the development of higher gods and more sophisticated religious rituals.

Example:

Polytheism: Hinduism

Hinduism has a vast array of gods and goddesses, including Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Monotheism: Islam

Muslims believe in one God (Allah) and follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as recorded in the Quran, the holy book of Islam.

© **Cultural Evolution:**

Tylor's theory of the evolution of primitive religion was part of broader framework of

cultural evolution. He believed that human societies progressed from simple and primitive stages to more advanced and civilized forms of cultural and social organizations.

2 Religio : Function

E. B Tylor and John Lubbock, two influential figures in the study of Primitive religion, proposed theories that highlight the function of religion in early human societies.

(a) Explanation of the Unknown:

Both Tylor and Lubbock's theories emphasize that primitive religion served as an attempt to explain the natural phenomena and events that early humans could not understand.

(b) Social Cohesion and identity:

Religion played a crucial role in building social cohesion and a sense of shared identity among early human groups. Common

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religious beliefs and rituals helped bind communities together, fostering a sense of belonging and cooperation within the group.

③ Coping with uncertainty and Anxiety:

Religion offered a means for early humans to cope with the uncertainties of life, including illness, death and unpredictable events. Rituals, prayers and offerings provided comfort and a sense of control over the unknown and unpredictable forces in their environment.

④ Moral and Ethical framework:

Both theories suggest that primitive religion provided moral and ethical guidelines for behaviour within the community. The belief in supernatural being or spirits who rewarded good behaviour and punished wrong doing encouraged adherence to societal norms and values.

⑤ Rituals and Rites of Passage:

Religious rituals were significant in both theories, playing a role in various life

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stages of individuals, such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death. These rituals held social and cultural significance, marking important milestones and transitions in the lives of individuals.

Critical Analysis:

The theories proposed by E. B. Tylor and John Lubbock regarding the evolution of primitive religion provide valuable insight into early human societies but their theories also have some significant weaknesses. Their Eurocentric perspective which was common in 19th century anthropology. The evolutionary framework they used to explain a linear progression from simple to complex forms, implicitly placing Western monotheistic religions at the pinnacle of human religion evolution. This perspective overlooks the richness and complexity of non-western belief systems.